University of Alberta

Feminism, Motherhood, Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Me

by

Myrl Louise Coulter ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Department of English and Film Studies

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 2007

Library and
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32945-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32945-0

NOTICE:
The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:
L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

Current debates about feminism and motherhood reveal the tensions between them. Mindful of Adrienne Rich's distinction between mothering as an individual experience and motherhood as a restrictive patriarchal institution, this dissertation takes up these debates as depicted in the novels written by Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, and Margaret Laurence. As well, the project integrates autobiographical writings about my own life as both an investigative method and an integral subtext.

If paired together as narrative characters, feminism and motherhood would be intimate antagonists, their stories autoethnographic texts portraying particular cultural moments that shape individual lives and entire communities. Recognizing that the relationship an individual has with feminism and motherhood depends heavily on that individual's subjectivity, I take the position that, for a needed alliance between feminism and motherhood to flourish, women must re-direct their energies away from denouncing each other's situations and instead towards dismantling the ideological structures that still exist around gender.

My project's primary task is to interrogate representations of Canadian women and mothers in the fiction of Urquhart, Shields, and Laurence. Each one has created strong maternal narratives in her creative work and commented on both feminism and mothering experiences in either a memoir or published interviews; however, the subtextual commentary on women's lives and maternity these three writers illustrate is quite different: Urquhart's work portrays a pessimistic view of patriarchal motherhood's impact on women's lives, Shields' work focuses on the contained resistance of women in

conventional domesticity, and Laurence's work, the earliest of the three, depicts increasingly feminist versions of mothering.

Following each chapter is a short personal afterword that provides further commentary about the connections that intrinsically link feminism, motherhood, and autobiography. My dissertation structure consists of two distinct voices: the academic voice that makes the intellectual argument and the personal voice that narrates my story. These two voices both alternate and blend. The shape of the dissertation works to keep them apart, but in the conclusion they come together in a blended commentary of mutual relevance.

Dedicated to

Samantha, Cameron, Andrea, and Ron

Acknowledgements

I want to express my profound gratitude to my supervisor, Janice Williamson, whose wise counsel and unfailing encouragement released me from a self-imposed strait-jacket and guided me to the finish line.

I also extend my deepest thanks to all my committee members, each of whom read my work thoughtfully and generously.

As well, I thank the faculty, staff, and graduate students of the Department of English and Film Studies for their consistent support.

I thank the University of Alberta for the opportunities provided during my program, especially the research funding that enabled me to investigate the roots of my primary texts.

I thank my varied network of family and friends who cheered me on during this extended process.

I thank my siblings who always help me to remember who I am.

I thank my mother who drifts farther from me every day, and my father who left this earth twenty-one years ago but is with me always.

I thank my adult children who make my soul swell with pride and astonishment.

I can find no adequate words to express my thanks to George, who shares my life and made this journey possible.

Preface: Single-Bodied Polyphony

Writing a dissertation is a strange process. Simultaneously exhilarating and disturbing, this odd experience turns into an adventure that feels invigorating at some moments and debilitating at others. The work is solitary yet collaborative; the material is awkward in its newness yet somehow comfortable in its familiarity; progress, often achingly slow, is suddenly punctuated by moments of frenetic output. The overall shape of the dissertation project falls apart at one moment and coalesces anew the next as ideas first collide and then inform each other.

Generically speaking, the dissertation is a serious document with a serious history. Traditionally, it speaks with an objective voice that conveys a complex argument developed outside individual or personal influences (Willard-Traub 28). Most dissertations are the result of extensive investigation that aims to reveal important new thinking about issues that may not have received adequate attention in previous published research. With content expected to be current to the point of anticipatory, the most successful dissertations offer ground-breaking theory and/or conceptually fresh methodology that will capture the attention of those in the discipline. Until recently, dissertations have largely been impersonal in tone and content, consisting of objective investigation from inside academic disciplines but outside the individual writer's life. Dissertations that have ventured into personal narrative often risked being considered anti-intellectual, less rigorous, or somehow "soft" (Nash 154). Knowing all these things, I still, in the three years that I have spent working on my thesis, found it impossible to distance my scholarly work from my life experience, and even found myself wondering why these two facets of my life could not meet on the pages I was churning out.

Fortunately for me, I am not alone in my curiosity about the place of personal narrative in scholarly writing, and found encouragement not only from my supervisor, but also in my research. Robert J. Nash comments, in *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, that an approved disciplinary approach to "formal academic writing [is] nothing more than a story about what's in and what's out in the field" (151). In *Women Writing the Academy*, Gesa Kirsch points out that feminist scholars have, among other important endeavours, done much work to "reevaluate and restore" the importance of "letters, diaries, journals, and autobiographies to the literary canon" (10-11). Nancy K. Miller's *Getting Personal* helped me to think about "personal criticism . . . [as] an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (1). I began to see my writing self as a walking, talking text, one that makes cultural commentary shaped not only by my intellectual knowledge but my lived experience. Even though I was well into my dissertation-writing process, I needed to go further: I wanted to discover more about how personal writing could serve as "a relay *between* positions to create critical fluency" (Miller 25). Does, as Jane Tompkins writes, "knowing that my knowledge is perspectival, language-based, culturally constructed" (27) make what I write more or less relevant, more or less credible, more or less available?

I have heard it said that one should stop reading while writing a dissertation. Whether that is good advice or bad, I did not take it. After reading Jane Gallop's *Anecdotal Theory*, I thought deeply about her observation that "feminists teaching and feminists talking about teaching have . . . challenged the exclusion of the personal from the academic" (23), and reflected at length about what this challenge can mean for the impact and accessibility of written intellectual material. More recently, I discovered Deborah E. Reed-Danahay's work on autoethnography, a discipline that "reflects a changing conception of both the self and society in the late twentieth century" (2). These influences, among others, convinced me even further to put personal narrative beside scholarly analysis in my dissertation to hear the conversation between them.

From the onset of this project, my early tentative inquiries soon evolved into dizzying complexities and then gave rise to other kinds of queries that always moved beyond the page into my everyday life. Although many of these questions began with the obvious one (why am I doing this?) to which there is no simple answer, other telling debates soon played out in my head: How does a dissertation's tone, stand, and argument connect to the life experience of the person writing it? Does it matter who writes a particular dissertation? What is the value of the cultural commentary in personally inflected intellectual work? What if dissertations were written in a personal voice instead of what I have come to think of as the third-person aloof, that informed but remote, deeply considered but somehow distant, academic voice the genre has traditionally demanded? All writers have more than one voice, but their voices are intrinsically linked one to another, forming an empowered outlet that not only claims the right to be heard but also, as Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson observe, clears "a space to speak amongst the voices of others who speak through us" (25). Connecting with my own multiple voices has been perhaps the most satisfying personal benefit of this extended creative process.

Taking heart from Gallop's claim that "the proper measure of learning is personal" (22), I offer this preface not only to comment on the presence of personal narrative in this project, but also as explanation of why I chose a dissertation structure that consists of two distinct voices: my academic voice makes my argument and my personal voice tells my story. These two voices both alternate and blend. The shape of my dissertation works to keep them apart: the academic voice dominates the introduction and the three chapters on Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, and Margaret Laurence; the personal voice dominates the short afterwords that follow each of those components; both voices come together in the conclusion. This structure feels a little like Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, even though the double-voiced narration has its source in a single body; one voice is not privileged over the other and each takes a turn controlling the content. In my head, they sound like a discordant symphony "in which two or more diverse melodies are carried on simultaneously" (Abrams 161). While these two written voices are ostensibly separate, they do merge at various moments, some of which I can see already and others waiting for discovery.

Two immediate benefits of personal narrative in scholarly writing are readily apparent to me. Whether comprehensive autobiography or focused memoir, personal narrative reflects and comments on the larger social arena, an arena that is not universal, but instead consists of particularly situated cultural locations. Further to that, the presence of personal narrative has an added benefit for discipline-specific intellectual work in that it often makes the hard work of dissertation production accessible to those outside the particular discipline and possibly even academia itself because the language of personal narrative is more openly available than the language of academic analysis. In this project, I strive to demonstrate these characteristics and seek out others.

Autobiographies usually begin at the predictable beginning that no one can actually know without being informed of its details by someone else. The autobiographical elements I include in my dissertation begin not with my actual birth, but with the social and cultural context of my natal situation. My sporadic self-narration spreads out to include half a century of other beginnings as well and interacts with my main topics of feminism and motherhood in that my story illustrates how my engagement with both those abstract concepts is intimately linked with my potential autobiography: that is to say, my story or stories that were as yet unwritten as I began this work. More broadly speaking, if an individual writing a dissertation simultaneously engaged in writing narratives from her (or his) life, the movements between those two works could and should inform the development and impact of both.

As my dissertation-writing process continued, I made the decision to do just that: turn my potential autobiography into a material text as part of my academic project. I began to write parts of my story as I worked on my scholarly writing. Now that this strange extended process is complete, I realize how much of an impact that decision has had both on my project and my sense of self. From my perspective, writing both personally and intellectually energized my productivity at crucial moments, revitalized my critical results, widened my interests, and initiated a renewed anticipation for future projects.

Table of Contents

Feminism, Motherhood,

Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, Margaret Laurence, and Me

Preface: Single-Bodied Polyphony i

Introduction: Feminism and Motherhood: Intimate Antagonists 1

Afterword: *In Medias Res* 50

Chapter 1: Absent Flowers and Gothic Narrators: Feminism, Mothers, and Motherhood in Jane Urquhart's Novels . . . 56

Afterword: *I'm an Intertext* 118

Chapter 2: Dissecting Goodness: Domestic Optimism in Carol Shields' Novels 126

Afterword: *Good Girl, Bad Girl, Good Mother, Bad Mother* 164

Chapter 3: Feisty Mothers and Cranky Old Ladies: Mothering in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka Series 174

Afterword: *A Settler Inheritance* 230

Conclusion: Feminism, Motherhood, and Me 239

Bibliography 253

Introduction: Feminism and Motherhood: Intimate Antagonists

> Most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture. (Hollows and Moseley 2)

> what mothers *don't* need is yet another normative discourse of the good mother. (O'Reilly, *Feminisms*, 207).

According to popular culture, feminism as a movement is either under siege or dying. That same knowledge source situates mothering and motherhood in a cultural conflict that pits those who work outside the home against those who stay in the home with their young children. In the North American political climate of today, sadly characterized by a neo-conservatism that threatens the gains made by the rights movements of the latter twentieth century, large corporate book vendors and quiet independent corner bookstores alike feature recent non-fiction publications that shout out feminism's unlamented demise and document verbal wars about what constitutes ideal mothering conditions. On the surface, feminism and motherhood are intimately connected: their central subjects are women. Slipping under that impossible universal veneer reveals that feminism and motherhood are more like antagonistic cousins, each from discrete family branches: motherhood is the esteemed solid stem, a fundamental institutional stalwart of patriarchal social orders, largely honoured and admired; feminism is the willful troublemaker, opponent of all patriarchal exploitation, the cause of much head-shaking and consternation. Yet, despite their conceptual differences, future directions of both these ideological cornerstones hinge upon their connection with each other and the intimacy through which each can inform the other's situation.

While books on so-called women's issues are rarely front and centre in busy public bookstores, a short foot search usually results in the discovery of at least one section dedicated to current publications about women's lives. Often listed under the heading "Women's Studies," its location varies. In some stores, the Women's Studies category is situated close to the Cultural Studies or Gay/Lesbian section, while in others, it is placed near African-American, Native, or Media Studies. Both placements suggest that Women's Studies' books are about socially constructed categories of identity, but largely of interest only to special interest groups rather than the majority of everyday book buyers.

Women's Studies is rarely located near History, Biography, War, Science, Geography, or any of those "serious" mainstream categories. In these sections, the shelves groan under a load of books that compete with each other on the basis of sheer size and title claims, none besting a massive tome called *World Atlas: The Mother of All Atlases*. Sometimes, successfully locating the Women's Studies section happens only after a stroll into the family section, where works deemed to be on women's issues only are safely tucked in with works dealing with child care and relationship self-help guides. Occasionally, bookstore wanderers will discover a Women's Studies section that sits, somewhat ironically, opposite those dealing with Political Science or Philosophy.[1]

---

[1] These observations are based on a one-person informal survey I conducted when I visited three independent bookstores and two Chapters' outlets in the Edmonton area in February, 2006. My thanks to Daphne Read for her observations about the location of Women's Studies in opposition to the often male-dominant areas of Philosophy and Political Science.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Women's Studies section in many bookstores features such works as Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner's *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy* and Phyllis Chesler's *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom*, publications that clearly cater to a negative public perception of western feminism through their titles and covers alone. Although the last two decades in North America have thus far been characterized by a backlash[2] against feminism, negative connotations associated with the words "feminist" or "feminism" are not recent developments; indeed, pejorative associations accompanied their initial appearances in the English language as nineteenth-century neologisms. Even though feminist activity in the western world can be traced from the Middle Ages onward, the term "feminist" did not appear until 1895, as debates over women's roles in Victorian society intensified (Saunders 26).[3] Over the years, negative reactions to the word came not only from men or non-feminist women: both Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf are examples of noted women writers whose feminist sensibilities informed their writing while they rejected the term itself (Walters 1-2), a contradiction that demonstrates how feminism is often a conflicted term even for feminists.

As issues of race, class, and sexuality came to prominence in the women's movement during the 1970s and 80s, the word "feminist" gathered more conflicting connotations. In the United States, Alice Walker rejected the term "feminism," turning instead to the words "womanism" and "womanist" to enable "feminist-minded women of color to identify without taking on a presumably 'white' feminist identity" (Heywood 268).[4]

---

[2] This word is obviously connected to Susan Faludi's "postfeminist" book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, published in 1992, in which she argues that "postfeminism [is] a devastating reaction against the ground gained by second wave feminism" (Gamble 2000, 45). I briefly discuss the term "postfeminism" further on in this introduction.

[3] Valerie Saunders points to the 1895 appearance of the word "feminist" in the Victorian newspaper, *Athenaeum*, as the first printed use of the term.

As a topic in contemporary popular culture, feminism invites the sensational and the inflammatory. The huge yellow block letters of *Are Men Necessary? When Sexes Collide* by Maureen Dowd silently scream the title and author's name to browsing potential readers. The cover design of Dowd's book is in lurid romance "bodice-ripper" style, emblazoned with a drawing of a curvaceous long-haired woman in a tight red dress standing up, studiously reading a book, ignoring the seated men who ogle her as they all ride together on a commuter train. Inside the back cover, Dowd's publisher provides a blurb proclaiming that the trajectory of the women's liberation movement is a "confusing zigzag," and in the first chapter, Dowd writes that "feminism lasted for a nanosecond" (8).

While the various forms of feminism may indeed feel zigzag-like or confusing, the claim that feminism was a short-lived "nanosecond" movement is blatantly wrong. Indeed, Stephanie Hodgson-Wright begins her discussion of "Early Feminism" in the years 1550-1700 with a biblical reference: "most feminist writers of the period sought to challenge the idea that women were an inferior branch of the human race, tainted by Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden" (5). Taking an historical approach, Margaret Walters begins her discussion of feminism in the late eleventh century with Hildegard of Bingen, a German nun who engaged in the distinctly "'unfeminine' activities" of "writing and composing" (6). Thus, the messages that writers like Rowe-Finkbeiner, Chesler, and Dowd bring to today's buying public are themselves adding to the "confusing zigzag" of conflicting arguments about the always controversial and perpetually misunderstood endeavours of feminism.

---

[4] Walker uses these terms in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

Nevertheless, the Dowd, Chesler, and Rowe-Finkbeiner books have something in common. While diverse in approach and content, one common feature they share is that the first sentence in virtually every one of them contains the word "I," indicating that feminism and autobiography are intrinsically linked in mainstream publishing, and more recently, scholarly work. Regardless of personal life conditions, most, if not all, feminist investigations originate in the writer's relationship to her or his lived realities. Reflections on a woman's particular life shape an individual's relationship to feminism and offer one explanation as to why the Women's Studies section in most bookstores features autobiographies and memoirs, along with polemics, heralding the demise of feminism and explorations probing the eternal clash of the sexes.

Finding books on motherhood and mothering requires less footwork; they are usually included in the Parenting section, with the majority of their content dealing with particular childcare issues and/or techniques. Nevertheless, close investigation reveals some publications that dare to take potential readers into a version of motherhood that disrupts its position as an institutional cornerstone of patriarchal society, books such as Ann Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood*,[5] Susan Douglas' and Meredith Michaels' *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, and Miriam Peskowitz's *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?*

---

[5] Ann Crittenden is an American financial writer, not to be confused, as she says herself, with Danielle Crittenden, a writer Ann Crittenden describes as "an antifeminist ideologue who has urged women to marry and have their babies young" (103).

Published in 2001 and illustrating the intimate connections between mothering and the written word, Crittenden begins her book on an autobiographical note, relating a personal anecdote about reading to her son. From there, she moves quickly to establish her argument that "changing the status of mothers . . . is the great unfinished business of the women's movement" (7). Peskowitz sets out, in *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, to examine the trends about mothering ideals since "the aging out of second wave feminism" (30) that resulted in the current situation in which "politics, advertising, and media have helped create and continue: a landscape of maternal judgment and distrust" (45). In *The Mommy Myth*, Douglas and Meredith present pervasive images of motherhood from thirty years of media images. They begin many chapters with a direct address to readers as mothers—"imagine it's Mother's Day, and you are being taken out to one of those god-awful brunches" (28)—which, in most female readers (no doubt the majority of whom are mothers), immediately invokes the pronoun "I" along with visions from their own lives. By writing against the traditional ideal of motherhood, books such as these delve into the critical links between the political goals of feminism and the social function of motherhood.

Following both the Crittenden and Peskowitz books, *The Motherhood Manifesto: What America's Moms Want – And What to Do About It* (2006), written by Joan Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner, depicts the conflicts women continue to face in a twenty-first century society informed by twentieth-century feminism yet still highly influenced by traditional motherhood ideals. The cover of this book is an image of the World War II female icon Rosie the Riveter[6] holding a diapered infant firmly in her well-muscled arm. This image represents not only the female strength that accompanies mothering duties, but also disrupts mainstream notions that feminists are not mothers and mothers are not feminists. As well, Rosie's working-class mother/feminist points to the conflicts between mothers who financially can make the choice to stay at home and mothers who must work to support their families, a distinction often glossed over by blinkered and single-minded liberal feminist thinking. *The Motherhood Manifesto* discusses many urgent issues maternal labour issues such as maternity leave, flexible work hours, healthcare, and childcare.

The books I have mentioned so far are all American in origin, which is unsurprising in that Canadian commodity culture is flooded with American cultural product. But in mainstream bookstores, Canadian books about motherhood and feminism are available to offer a national perspective. Ann Douglas' numerous works include the entertaining *Canuck Chicks and Maple Leaf Mamas.*[7] As well, since her first monograph in1994 (*You're Smarter Than They Make You Feel*), psychologist Paula Caplan has also published many books on maternal issues such as her influential *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (1989) that was revised and reissued in (2000).

Any discussion about Canadian perspectives on mothering would be incomplete without including Marni Jackson, a regular contributor to newspapers and magazines, including *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *Saturday Night*, and *Rolling Stone*. Jackson explores diverse, but connected, issues: in *Pain: The Fifth Vital Sign* (2002), she explores "the hidden territory of pain" as both a physical and emotional experience (Jackson), and in *The Mother Zone* (1992), she embarks on a humorous, touching exploration of the myths of motherhood. Reviewed positively by readers and critics, including Carol Shields who called it an "exuberant, generous-hearted book . . . intelligent, reflective and touchingly brave" (Jackson), *The Mother Zone* became a Canadian bestseller when it was first published and was re-issued in 2002.

---

[6] Rosie the Riveter represented the American female workforce that went into the factories during the war and was forced back into the domestic sphere at war's end. For information about Rosie and her famous image see http://womenshistory.about.com/library/pic/bl_p_rosie.htm

[7] Ann Douglas is the author of 28 books on various aspects of mothering and family. Her works include *The Mother of All Pregnancy Book* and *The Mother of All Toddler Book.*

Popular books on mothering issues, sometimes meticulously researched, are aimed at wide audiences with self-help and/or humorous approaches sometimes substituting for complex analysis. While popular and academic writing can and do overlap, scholarly work taking up Canadian motherhood approaches examine the social, cultural, and political parameters that condition and monitor the maternal experience. These present a more rigorous approach that interrogates root ideological conditions than popular publications would offer.

In the area of scholarship and critique, Canadian writers and theorists are at the forefront of maternal research and theory both in North America and abroad. Canada is home to *The Association for Research on Mothering* (*ARM*). Created in 1998, *ARM* is, as founder Andrea O'Reilly writes, "the first feminist international organization devoted spefically to the topic of mothering-motherhood" (*Mothering* 7). *ARM*'s purpose was (and is) to address an institutional gap by becoming the first feminist organization to investigate issues of motherhood and mothering. Today, ARM has more than five hundred members from twenty countries. In the ten years since its inception, *ARM* has provided a much-needed place and space for discussions and research into any and all mothering topics, and has evolved into an

> association of scholars, writers, activists, policy makers, educators, parents, and artists . . . committed to . . . the inclusion of all mothers: First Nations, immigrant and refugee mothers, working-class mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers with disabilities, mothers of colour, and mothers of other marginalized communities.[8]

As well, *ARM* hosts an annual conference in October, organizes the meetings for a feminist mothers' group, *Mother Outlaws* (*Association*), and has launched its own publishing division, Demeter Press, which has published four books to-date, with nine more forthcoming.

Moreover, ARM has a regular publication, *Journal of the Association for Research on Motherhood*. This journal has become a crucial forum that offers intellectual researchers and analysts the needed publishing venue for their work. To date, nineteen editions of the *ARM* journal have been published, each one focusing on a specific maternal issue and providing space for artwork, photography, and poetry (*Association*). The journal has published needed intellectual explorations such as Sharon Abbey's "Researching Motherhood as a Feminist" in which Abbey examines how personal narratives challenge "traditional images and ideologies of motherhood" (45); Emily Jeremiah's "Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature, and Ethics" in which Jeremiah investigates how "maternal writing . . . [is] a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged" (7); Michelle Moravec's "Mother Art:

---

[8] I quote from ARM's mandate as described in *Mothering and Literature, The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering,* Fall/Winter 2002, Volume 4, Number 2.

Feminism, Art and Activism" in which Moravec looks at how "grassroots feminists combined motherhood and activism" (69-70); Fiona Joy Green's "Developing a Feminist Motherline: Reflections on a Decade of Feminist Parenting" in which Green uses information gathered from interviews with ten mothers whose feminist mothering "challenge[s] the myths around mothering and provide[s] models . . . that honour social activism" (19); and Andrea O'Reilly's "Between the Baby and the Bathwater: Some Thoughts on a Mother-Centred Theory and Practice of Feminist Mothering" in which O'Reilly argues that while the development of the empowered mothering concept is certainly worthwhile, it is not yet a "truly transformative and transgressive feminist theory and practice of mothering" (329).

ARM's endeavours speak to the critical need for collaboration between motherhood studies and feminism. A popular Canadian book on feminism, Judy Rebick's *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* echoes one of the motivating factors in my dissertation work, when she writes that feminism has taught her that "your view of the world depends in no small measure on your location in it" (xi). Rebick goes on to describe how Canadian feminism differs from American feminism:

> Unlike in the United States, women's liberation in Canada started with an alliance between older feminists and young radicals. . . . socialist feminists played an important role from the beginning, making sure the interests of working-class women were part of the movement. . . . through the efforts of women of colour and Aboriginal women, we succeeded here for a time in creating a multiracial women's movement, with strong leadership from women of colour, Aboriginal

> women and immigrant women. To my knowledge, this has not happened anywhere else in the world. We haven't overcome the divisions created by racism, but we have learned a lot about constructing alliances across the differences created by race, class, and national and ethnic divisions, alliances essential to creating a better, more egalitarian world. (xii)

Identifying herself as a "middle-class, white, Jewish woman whose generation believed anything is possible" (xi), Rebick fills her book with many different voices including those who participated in second-wave feminist activities in Canada from its onset. Arguing that second-wave feminism in Canada predated second-wave feminism in the United States,[9] Rebick locates the Canadian beginning with the formation of Voice of Women in 1960, a group that came together so that women could "do something about the threat of imminent nuclear war" (3).

Rebick invites those who were there to contribute narratives about their experiences in their own words, moving from the 1970 Abortion Caravan to struggles for pay and employment equity, from child care issues to legal representation in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Concerned that "much of the experience of second wave feminism . . . is getting lost" (xii-iii), Rebick reminds her readers that women from all corners of Canadian society played roles in the feminist quests for women to share fully in making decisions about Canadian life. All the women, whether "liberal, middle-class women" or "radical feminists, Marxists, anarchists, black consciousness militants, Quebec nationalists, union activists, left-wing NDPers and plain old kick-ass shit disturbers" (xiii) worked together to effect change. One positive result is a Canadian society that is relatively open to change in a change-resistant western world; however, Rebick says, "feminists have failed to uproot patriarchy" in Canada and "there are few strong voices for feminism at the moment" (xiv-v).

---

[9] Rebick writes that generally speaking, "the second wave of feminism is agreed to have started in 1963, with the publication . . . of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*" (5).

With this overview in mind, I provide the following discussion to give a context for my study: an initial exploration of the historical links between feminism, motherhood, and autobiography; a brief summary of the three waves of feminism in North America, as well as comments about the development of feminist literary criticism; observations about western notions of motherhood as a social institution and its intrinsic links to feminism; an examination of autobiography as an impetus that moves thinkers and writers to begin thinking and writing in new and/or disruptive ways about feminism and motherhood; and commentary on autoethnography as a critical method that works towards new alliances. My purpose is to ask how the collision between location and the historical development of feminist thinking affects representations of Canadian women and mothers in fictional work produced by Canadian writers who are, by their social rather than individual situation, descendents of those women who participated in and benefited from the early women's rights movements in twentieth-century Canada: white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class women.

This initial discussion ends by establishing how each subsequent chapter takes these opening observations about feminism, motherhood, and autobiography into the work of three internationally-known Canadian writers, Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, and Jane Urquhart, whose novels both reflect and challenge the very ideological waters we share.

Immediately following the introduction is the first of four afterwords that alternate with the body chapters. These afterwords are autobiographical first-person narratives thematically linked to what precedes them. Thus, this dissertation strives to explore the relationship between feminism and motherhood using moments of autobiographical reference as both an investigative method and an integral subtext.

At this point, I may seem to have made a curious choice. In a time when the need for multiple perspectives about all key cultural issues is paramount, when current critical thinking ponders the continuing "postness" of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and postfeminism, when the plurality of ideas is fundamental to intellectual work, why does this dissertation go back to white, middle-class, heterosexual, privileged women writers to examine feminism and motherhood? My reasons are precisely those I just described: because multiple perspectives include new analyses of writers whose works are still being taught, largely uncritically in secondary schools and from various critical positions in post-secondary education[10]; because "post" does not just mean "after,"[11] but also "stemming from" and "connected to"; and because pluralism rejects universal truths and seeks different kinds of understandings about ostensibly known entities. For those reasons, I turn to imaginative work from three well-known Canadian writers who produced their most successful books as second- and third-wave feminisms roiled around them.

---

[10] As examples, Alberta Learning lists works by Margaret Laurence and Jane Urquhart in their Grades 7-12 English Language Arts curriculums.

[11] Sarah Gamble describes the prefix "post" in this way: "its trajectory is bewilderingly uncertain, since while it can certainly [suggests] a relapse *back* to a former set of ideological beliefs, it can also be read as indicating the *continuation* of the originating term's aims and ideologies, albeit on a different level" (2000, 44-5).

One of the problems in first-wave and early second-wave feminism was that being white was the perceived normative identity, a universal identity without ethnicity. This problematic vision denies, as Linda Martin Alcoff writes in "What Should White People Do?" the complexities of all white identities: "whiteness has always been fractured by class, gender, sex, ethnicity, age, and able-bodiedness" (265). Rather than a retrograde exercise that furthers "the colonizer's privilege to decide the true, the just, and the culturally valuable" (Alcoff 263), I examine anew writing by white, middle-class, heterosexual women as a necessary component in the necessary alliances between feminists of all ideologies and mothers of all circumstances. In order for these alliances to flourish, people in general, and women in particular, need to re-direct their energies away from denouncing each other's choices and towards dismantling the ideological structures around gender.

* * *

Feminism's varied public image is largely derived from its modern history as a twentieth-century phenomenon consisting of several separate movements that caused great controversy as women demanded needed social reforms to address imbalances built into western society. The impact of the first two feminist movements on western society continues to be immense.

Although feminist history is often defined by the consecutive "wave" analogy, feminist activities from the nineteenth century into the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries are connected and disconnected from each other. Despite the connecting metaphor that has come to define these movements in retrospect, and the rebellions and contributions of individual women, the large-scale social movement of second-wave feminism is separated from the earlier movement by fifty years. By contrast, what is now referred to as third-wave feminism followed soon after second-wave feminism and is seen by many as a direct negative response to the second-wave movement.

Leslie Heywood refers to third-wave feminism as "a continuation of feminism with a difference" (xv), while Stacy Gillis says that the third wave surged as "fundamental principles of the feminist project were hotly contested" (1). While the terms postfeminism and third-wave feminism are at times used interchangeably, distinctions between them are both temporal and discursive. Many writers locate the beginning of North American postfeminism in the 1980s as a new generation of women spurned second-wave feminism because they felt it positioned women as passive victims of patriarchy rather than active social agents: "postfeminists often acknowledge being products of feminism while rejecting *affiliation* with feminism" (Heywood 253). The shift from second-wave to postfeminism was soon complicated by critics who, as Sarah Gamble notes, began to see a "bias within postfeminism towards the young, white, liberal, and media-attractive" (2000, 48), especially after the publication of Naomi Wolf's 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth.*[12] Almost immediately, a signal for yet another shift came in 1992, when Rebecca Walker, daughter of "womanist" prose writer Alice Walker, denied the postfeminist label and created a new one: "I am not a postfeminism feminist . . . I am the Third Wave" (Heywood 253).

---

[12] Wolf's book heavily criticized the beauty industry for eroding female power by demanding a specific version of female beauty. As Leslie Heywood notes, Wolf's book was a popular success that "received massive media coverage and positive reviews" (xvi).

Since then, third-wave feminism has been used to designate the most recent feminist movement; as a cohesive entity, it has made significant use of the internet, a source unavailable to second-wave feminism until after that wave had crested. One popular culture website, authored by six writers who identify themselves by their first names only, proclaims the movement's energy and motivation in generational terms by saying that third-wavers are "putting a new face on feminism, taking it beyond the women's movement that our mothers participated in" (The 3rd WWWave).[13] These differences, as depicted by wave metaphor or by "post" movement reactions against the generations that went before them, are less a linear continuum from one moment to the next than a social forgetting or cultural amnesia that rises and falls in different historical moments. Although all feminist activities supposedly have a common fundamental characteristic, to dismantle patriarchal structures that oppress women, the "industrial fragmentation of life" and the "open[ing of] the political stage to significant participation by ever-widening groups of people" has resulted, over the years, in separated feminist approaches and multiple reactions to specific historical moments (Miles 11). In their introduction to *Feminism in Canada*, Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn examine the different historical moments and pressures that both divide and unite feminist of all waves and theories.

In addition to the half a century between them, the first two feminist movements are divided by tremendous social and political upheaval: the end of WW I, the North American depression of the 1930s, the recurrence of WW II that brought the lasting traumas of the Holocaust, the horrors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945, and the cold war that immediately followed the long-awaited end to World War II. Whereas first-wave feminism grew out of the demand for women to participate fully in the political process, second-wave feminism demanded what having the right to vote had not provided: "full human rights for women" (Heywood 136). Beginning on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in the early 1960s, second-wave feminism consisted of several streams of thinking: for socialist feminists, women's oppression was class and labour based; for liberal feminists, the struggle was for equality within existing ideologies; and for radical feminists, the male-dominant patriarchal order was the source of female exploitation. In the United States, second-wave feminism, as Sue Thornham writes, originated "in the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War and student movements of the 1960s" (30). In Canada as well, second-wave feminism crossed both geographical and ideological borders:

---

[13] The website creators sign themselves only as Cindy, Sidra, Janis, Kim, Fazia, and Alana. Their website reflects the tensions between second-wave and third-wave feminism, in that the authors state that they intend to return feminism to "*real women* who juggle jobs, kids, money, and personal freedom in a frenzied world," a claim that demeans the many women who lived through second-wave feminism doing just that.

> By the end of the 1960s, there were three streams of feminism in Canada: VOW [Voice of Women] peace activists; the middle-class mothers and career women who belonged to established groups such as the Canadian Federation of University Women and the YWCA; and the young radicals. . . . In 1971, VOW organized public meetings and conferences all across Canada where Vietnamese women spoke to hundreds of American women, who came to Canada to meet them and were supposedly their enemies. Young feminists welcomed and supported this important contribution to the anti-war movement. As a

> new decade dawned, the three streams of feminism flowed together to form the second wave of the Canadian women's movement. (Rebick 13)

In this passage, Rebick remembers a version of an inclusive second-wave feminism that would not have been possible without the written word: "women's writing and publishing were indispensable to the feminist revolution" (19). Not all was flowing as smoothly as indicated here, however, and Rebick also recalls that the three streams she refers to in the above passage eventually became two—those trying to reform the existing system and those trying to tear down and transform it—existing together in an "uneasy alliance" (21), a strained alliance in which political differences and strategies divided efforts and impeded successful outcomes.

In the late twentieth century, both first-wave and the early part of second-wave feminism were strongly criticized for working to benefit only white middle-class women, and for ignoring how different social and cultural circumstances situated many women outside conventional white, middle-class, heterosexual parameters. The resulting debates took feminism to new levels in that "feminism . . . usefully problematized the notion of a monolithic white identity raising issues of gender and sometimes class" (Alcoff 264). Feminist critics such as Valerie Smith, Ien Ang, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty,[14] among others, rightly pointed out that a universal sisterhood did not exist. In retrospect, in spite of, and perhaps because of, the problems within the feminist movement, the goals accomplished by first- and second-wave feminism in the twentieth century—such as the right to vote, the right to abortion and birth control, improvements to health and education, movements towards appropriate wages for women, and the opening up of formerly closed career and employment opportunities—were crucial ones that lead to more inclusive investigations that have resulted in a pluralistic sense of feminism as a needed global ideology.

---

[14] The particular works I am thinking of here are Smith's "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," and Ang's "I'm a feminist but . . . 'Other' women and postnational feminism."

Moreover, out of the early years of second-wave feminism came feminist literary criticism, a discipline consisting of numerous investigative practices that enable diverse endeavours. In her introduction to *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century* Misha Kavka writes of an enabling principle that uses feminism as "an umbrella term for an ever growing range of political projects and endeavours" (xi). The many diverse attitudes towards feminism are indicative of the various connotations and characteristics attached to it; these attitudes also demonstrate that, whatever characteristics feminism wears in the first decade of the twenty-first century, cohesiveness is not one of them. The approaches taken by feminist criticism offer multiple methods for exploring feminism's many guises and its mythic public image. One of those methods is self-examination.

In "Feminism And/As Myth," Barbara Godard links her commentary on Canadian feminist literary criticism to her own "personal intellectual trajectory" (5), a journey initiated by her exposure to the 1960s theories of both Northrop Frye and Roland Barthes.[15] Taking a critical tour through an anonymous bookstore similar to the one that opens this chapter, Godard discovers a book about myth, women, and masochism,[16] and uses it to motivate her written observations about what she calls the "myth of motherhood" (4). Notable about Godard's essay is that she approaches the topic of feminism through an autobiographical trajectory that takes her almost immediately to motherhood as a mythic entity. Defining the word "myth" is itself a mythic exercise: a myth is an old narrative long distanced from historical accuracy that still conveys universal, immutable, commonalities acknowledged as both objective and "natural." Patriarchal in origin, transmission, and subtext, myths are consistently androcentric, always subject to reshaping according to dominant cultural contexts, and, says Godard, "overwhelming instruments in suppressing women" (7). In mainstream western culture, the terms matrilineal – kinship through the maternal line – and matriarchal – a society organized and governed by women – are often confused. Moreover, whether matrilineal or matriarchal, myth usually still functions to maintain the unbalanced power relations that still make up the foundations of contemporary western society, and myths about feminism and/or motherhood are no exception.[17]

---

[15] Godard is specifically referring to Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) in which he examines organized myths in literature and Barthes' notion of "the death of the author" in which he disrupts privileged authorial perspective, published in *Criticism and Truth* (1966).

[16] The book Godard talks about here is *The Myth of Women's Masochism* by Paula Caplan (4). Her comments about Frye and Barthes refer to the following well-known critical works: Frye's 1957 text, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, and Barthes *Mythologies* (1973).

By contrast, western society's concept of motherhood is that of a "natural" human condition, an immanent, cohesive continuum infused with a reified, normative immutability that gives it deified status seemingly above contemplation or examination. Adrienne Rich forcefully takes issue with this concept in her milestone work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, when she writes that "the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the 'human condition' any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are" (33). When it was first published in 1976, Rich's controversial work drew much attention to the rigid, normative status of mothers by situating mothering as the way in which individual women approach their responsibilities as mothers, whereas motherhood is an ideological creation with specific social functions, a creation that was formed not by women but by western civilization's male-dominant society.

---

[17] Further investigation into patriarchal, matriarchal, or matrilineal myth would be an intriguing undertaking. My research shows no study of matrilineal myth in contemporary western society. A dated study, *Matrilinial Kinship, and the Question of its Priority*, published in 1964, was written by Edwin Sidney Hartland for a series undertaken by the American Anthropological Association. A more current study, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, is more useful in that author Cynthia Eller explains that the appealing image of a halcyon female-centred ancient history is one feminists should view with caution.

More than a quarter of a century later, virtually all investigations into mothering and motherhood gesture to *Of Woman Born* because of its status as, in Andrea O'Reilly's words, "the first and arguably still the best feminist book on mothering and motherhood" (*From Motherhood*, 1). This esteemed status not only points to the significance of Rich's text, but also illustrates that motherhood, an ideal determined by patriarchal traditions and its inherited history, is automatically linked by gender issues to the twentieth-century waves of feminism and their mandates to challenge the patriarchal structures that limit and exploit opportunities for women. An institutional cornerstone for the organization of patriarchal societies, motherhood is, by its very intimacy to everyone's life, often an uncomfortable target for even the most ardent feminist to tackle. Such foundational connections stipulate that feminism and motherhood continue to co-exist in a congenital relationship that is both intimate and conflicted.

Should feminists, ardent or otherwise, decide to apply their critical skills to in-depth investigations of either feminism or motherhood, their decisions are almost invariably motivated by moments in their own potential autobiographies when personal location intersects with public or professional lived experience. For example, in what many consider to be the first major text of twentieth-century feminism,[18] Simone de Beauvoir begins *The Second Sex* with the qualifier that "for a long time, I have hesitated to write a book on woman" (xix), and goes on to explain her reasons for that hesitation by alternating between general cultural observations and personal reflection. In retrospect, de Beauvoir's hesitation was well-founded, because celebrity and controversy courted *The Second Sex* from the outset. As Deirdre Bair observes in her introduction to the 1989 edition of what is undoubtedly de Beauvoir's most famous work, much initial public reaction focused on ridiculing the writer as an aberrant female run amok, a reaction that, over the next few years, evolved into fear and/or adoration as the book became more widely read (vii-viii). According to Bair, de Beauvoir set out to write about women so that she could "learn more about herself" (viii), suggesting that, *The Second Sex* was, according to the author herself, an avoidance of autobiography.

---

[18] In the "Introduction to the Vintage Edition" of *The Second Sex*, Deirdre Bair concludes by quoting herself: "Feminist ideology cannot ignore Simone de Beauvoir; her importance should be unquestioned and is undeniable. The real question will be how to assess her contribution, and what use to make of it in the future," and allows herself a codicil that says, "I believe we would do well to start with *The Second Sex*" (xvii).

Taking an approach similar to de Beauvoir's, Adrienne Rich sets up the autobiographical motivation for *Of Woman Born* as a metaphysical calling, one she, like de Beauvoir, avoided for a while, but ultimately embraced:

> ". . . I did not choose this subject; it had long ago chosen me. This book is rooted in my own past, tangled with parts of my life which stayed buried even while I dug away at the strata . . . . for a long time I avoided this journey back . . . . until I began to feel strong enough, and unambivalent enough in my love for my children, so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever traveled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings." (15).

Rich's words speak to the power of motherhood's hold on individual lives, lives that become tangled up with the urgent creative emotions that mothering another human life entail, lives that are simultaneously weighed down by judgmental social expectations about how that mothering should progress. Rich shows that her need to prove her abilities as a mother both to herself and those around her was a prior condition that had to be met before she could write about her experiences. Rich's slow tentative approach to her crucial topic reflects how even those with access to resources and a publishing platform are subject to the social penalties western society levies against women who transgress the boundaries of the taboo-laden journey that is motherhood. Not surprisingly, those who decide to write about this journey in any genre are inevitably engaging in an autobiographical process.

Telling one's own story is a narrative exercise: it consists of developing characters, describing the settings, and creating a plot that will include selected episodes and exclude others. The result is often promoted (not only by the writer, but also by publishers and marketers) as the unassailable "truth." [19] Autobiography's acceptance as authentic and truth-based glosses over its critical function as, as Caren Kaplan observes, an "out-law genre" that "renegotiate[s] the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history" (130), a genre that consists of fragments pieced together in the "fictional nature of memory" (131). While Kaplan's work importantly questions notions of autobiography as a vehicle that too often privileges western feminist voices who claim to speak to and for non-western women, Kaplan also examines autobiography as "resistance literature . . . overtly political, sometimes anonymous, always pressuring the boundaries of established genres" (120). For feminist literary criticism, autobiography is an important genre, one that needed to be separated from a normative masculinity, because, as Liz Stanley writes, it "shares with feminism a focus on the shifting and complex boundaries between self and other, past and present, writing and reading, fact and fiction" (40). With women's hands holding the pens that create and critique, writing the self resists rather than repeats the so-called master narratives of the past.

---

[19] The reading public has a passionate investment in biography, autobiography, and memoir. That these genres are usually read as unassailable monolithic truth is evident in the current controversy and legal proceedings involving James Frey's quasi-memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. The Frey controversy is reminiscent of a 1970s scandal in which Clifford Irving posed as Howard Hughes' commissioned biographer. For more on that situation, see *Hoax: The Inside Story of the Howard Hughes Clifford Irving Affair* by Stephen Fox, Lewis Chester, and Magnus Linklater.

Writing autobiography gives women agency. Sidonie Smith sees women autobiographers as resisting agents who "confront[. . .] the mess and clutter of the many unofficial, 'inauthentic,' and nonidentical subjectivities available to them" (22). Thinking of autobiography as "individual surveys . . . [that] facilitate awareness, understanding, and future map making activities" (1993, 10), Helen Buss makes use of a landscaping metaphor in which autobiography is a guide that highlights the relevance of individual histories in the mapping of a communal future: however, that map has been a gendered one, in that autobiography originated as "a genre constructed for and by males" (*Mapping*, 6), thus making autobiography a necessary feminist project for the mapping of the female self.

Autobiography is a self-reflexive practice that "shapes how people see themselves as they help to shape [the genre itself]" (Rak 24). Not a comprehensive rendition of a life, memoir is autobiography's little sister, according to Linda Anderson, "a lower order since [memoir] involve[s] a lesser degree of 'seriousness' than autobiography" (8). Dealing with smaller slices of a larger life as it does, memoir, nevertheless can be as intimate and "serious" as autobiography. As Janet Mason Ellerby indicates, memoir often focuses attention on painful episodes that "not only reveal the intimate life of the memoirist, but also lay bare the private lives of the memoirist's family, spouses, lovers, and friends" (176). Publishing a memoir, then, makes public private stories that disclose social and cultural contexts as they simultaneously work to shape community attitudes surrounding those contexts. Because readers tend to approach memoirs and autobiography trusting that the writer will share as accurately as possible, these texts of self narrative offer intellectual opportunities to examine how "intimate narratives of socially significant memories can publicly resonate" (Ellerby 32). Ellerby's work demonstrates the personal connections and public tensions encountered when examining the life of the self. That self-examination is not only an autobiographic endeavour, but also an autoethnographic exercise.

The writing of the self as located in a particular social and cultural community, is autoethnography, and autoethnographic stories, according to Carolyn Ellis, "connect social science to literature, academic interests to personal ones, emotions to cognition, and social life to the concrete living of it" (117). Initially related to hierarchical anthropological work in which western researchers studied non-western cultures, autoethnography is distinguished from ethnography in that the work is produced by a member of the group being studied.[20] Now, autoethnography has become an important critical stance used to remember, document, resist, identify, represent, examine, and/or revolutionize particular cultural conditions from within the subject society rather than from an observer's stance.

---

[20] For a short history of autoethnography, see Deborah Reed-Danahay's *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, pages 4-9.

In producing an intellectual work that includes a personal story, the writer becomes a subject player in both arenas. Positioning the professional and the personal side by side illustrates that, just as in the personal, resolutions can rarely all be worked out: so it is with the intellectual. Because knowledge of both self and profession is always incomplete, the personal and the professional meld but do not solidify or remain static. Change is ever at hand. The benefits of this fluidity is that personally-inflected critical texts work towards positive cultural goals: "human solidarity, community, sense making, coping, and improving life conditions" (Ellis 115). Although the autoethnographic voice will characteristically be a solipsistic one, that same autoethnographic voice adds to important abstract evaluations. Critical self-reflection is not merely of the self, but of the cultural and social context that contributed to producing that self and whole communities of like-minded individuals. Thus, lateral connections between narrative texts and intellectual texts, between writing the self and writing the critique, between the introspective re-creation and the aloof analytical scholarly pursuit create needed intersections from which new directions emerge.

In what could be considered an early autoethnographic work, Betty Friedan's 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, caused a huge uproar not unlike the European reaction to de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Although criticized in retrospect for "a simplistic argument . . . [and] being narrowly middle class" (Walters 102), Friedan meticulously researched *The Feminine Mystique*. Including stories of herself and her community, she connected the results of that research with housewives in all regions of

North America who were suffering from what Friedan infamously calls "The Problem That Has No Name," the title of the first chapter in the book. Like de Beauvoir, Friedan acknowledges the personal impetus that motivated her to write the book: in the preface, Friedan writes ". . . I came to realize that something is very wrong with the way American women are trying to live their lives today. I sensed it first as a question mark in my own life . . ." (9).

With the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1970, second-wave feminism took a turn away from the domestic: Millett writes a warning into the preface of her book, one that alerts the reader to "the relatively uncharted, often even hypothetical territory which lies before *him*" (my emphasis, xiii). That this warning invokes the universal English language pronoun that absorbs the female into the male speaks to the book's "attempts to formulate a systematic overview of patriarchy as a political institution" (xiii). While *Sexual Politics* largely eschews autobiographical references, Millet's voice in the text takes the tone of a seasoned literary critic who just happens to be working in the relatively new field of feminist critique as she tackles sexual representation in the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet.

As the 70s progressed, second-wave feminists in North America delved further into the indoctrination of housewifery depicted in Friedan's work and the sexual objectification that Millett investigates. As well, feminist activity involved Germaine Greer's call for women to "learn how to question the most basic assumptions of feminine normality" (14) and Mary Ellman's edict that women must resist feminine stereotypical characteristics such as "Formlessness, Passivity, Instability, Confinement" (55) to name but four on Ellman's index list. In the 1980s, however, much criticism of white solipsism arose and writers like Rita Mae Brown (Walters 107) and Audre Lorde (Walters 117) challenged the North American notion of a universal sisterhood that not only ignored lesbian feminism, but also overlooked issues of class and race, and the deeply-rooted cultural practices that non-western women in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Today, effective feminism must understand the inheritance of first- and second-wave feminisms, and acknowledge "the inseparability of history and manifesto in feminist work" (Kavka xxiv) in that current goals must be informed by what went before.

In addition to being described as different waves, feminism has also been pictured as generational. In the 1990s, as Astrid Henry observes, the "mother-daughter relationship" often symbolically used to connect second- and third-wave feminism is both positive and problematic: for some third-wavers, "feminism was like a stern mother telling women how to behave" (1), while for others, feminism has provided "a language and a set of tools to fight for social justice and to see the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression" (2). The "fight" metaphor is almost as prominent in writing about feminism as both the wave and generational analogies. As participants in a male-dominated society that imposes limiting designations and functions on them, women have had to fight from within a category that has always been open to contestation: women as well as men have opposed expanding women's rights with motherhood being one of the most prevalent influences.

An instrumental force in the first-wave feminist movement was a "maternal feminism" that held that women should have access to the vote, health care and education so that they would be better mothers. This successful movement, which did achieve suffrage for North American women, left its sensibilities deeply rooted in the mothers and grandmothers of little girls who likely grew up to be those very young women who participated in early second-wave feminism in the late sixties and seventies. In many cases, the daughters and granddaughters of first-wave feminists became the activists who fought to build on the early twentieth century achievement of getting women the right to vote by working in the later twentieth century to claim social and economic status for women equitable to that of men.

The misplaced motherliness of maternal feminism that characterized the first-wave campaign to allow women to participate in the political process by casting their own votes did not work to change the overall everyday life conditions of many women. For first-wave feminists, women had a place in society and were not to move out of it too much. This observation is not intended to diminish the obstacles that faced first-wave feminists nor the significance of their success in achieving suffrage for women. Their fight was complicated because establishment critics, both male and female, predicted the potential degeneration of western society because women would be neglecting their "natural" social responsibilities if granted access to public activity.

Later thinkers and theorists have, of course, dissected the failings of first wavers in detail. Mariana Valverde charges that, by claiming virtuous ground for white, middle-class women in Canada, first-wave feminists contributed to the creation of a female hierarchy that had "nefarious consequences" for women who were "stigmatized and oppressed not only through gender but also through their labeling as 'feeble-minded,' 'unfit,' or 'primitive" (13). Valverde's work delves into criticism of the first-wave feminist subtext that quality mothering was not a characteristic of all women, but only white, Christian women, preferably of the pioneering variety. In *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, Valverde notes that, while the white Canadian middle-class woman extended philanthropic and charitable efforts towards improving the conditions of the less fortunate, she simultaneously encouraged their assimilation into Canadian middle-class culture; both endeavours were motivated by a push to "establish a non-antagonistic capitalist class structure, not to erase class differences" (29).

In "'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," Valverde takes this point further. If first-wave feminists in Canada had been able to transcend their times by relinquishing the moral role assigned to women of privilege and worked on behalf of all women of all races, she argues, they would have been "better 'mothers of the race'" (20). The phrase "mothers of the race" is a gesture back to the nineteenth-century American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman,[21] but Valverde's rhetorical gesture to the past also points ahead to a more current question that asks whether or not the dated aspects of early Canadian feminist agendas are not really dated at all. Do their negative political consequences continue to reverberate in an ongoing, well-mothered process?

Today, feminism still has a publicly reviled image that contrasts vividly with publicly revered visions of motherhood. The gap between these two public perceptions becomes more apparent when examining the relationship between feminist criticism and motherhood. One activity of early feminist criticism was, and continues to be, to reclaim and rediscover the "mothers" of women's writing: Canadian scholarship in this field includes *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers,* which not only asserts that "genres and themes frequently used by women writers have been devalorized by a patriarchal culture," but also that autobiographical texts are important representations of a "variance . . . [a] disparity between what women's voices say and what has been accepted as a central Canadian statement" (McMullen 2). Yet, despite a foundational connection between critical feminist activity and the maternal, feminism and motherhood have a distinctly uneasy relationship.

---

[21] Both Valverde's title and quotation are taken from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1898 publication, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, republished by Harper & Row in 1966, just as second-wave feminism was gaining momentum.

In their introduction to *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy refer to the critical gulf that exists between feminism and motherhood as "feminist avoidance of the maternal" (2-3). Moreover, even if feminist criticism does avoid the maternal, Daly and Reddy argue further, "few fictional or theoretical works begin with the mother in her own right . . . and those that do seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective" (2-3). Whether this seemingly fundamental conflict is deeply-rooted discord or merely disharmony, both maternal feminists and feminist mothers have negotiated that intimate gulf by writing in various forms: casual musings, introductions to significant arguments, full-fledged memoir, or fictional representation.

Feminist literary criticism has been chastised for being too broad in scope and methodology,[22] yet this very breadth allows for investigative diversity and interdisciplinary activity. While the various forms of feminism – Marxist, psychoanalytic, liberal, radical, and postcolonial to name a few – are multiple in application and approach, this wide range also makes feminist literary criticism malleable and friendly to a variety of investigative projects. Moreover, its adaptability encourages productive collisions between numerous perspectives on almost any topic.

---

[22] Misha Kavka writes that "the objects, goals, and definitions of feminism [have] had the effect of splintering what had been a recognizable project into unrecognizability, even into a paradoxical state of visible invisibility" (ix).

Janet Todd connects the origins of feminist literary criticism with the publication of two specific texts in particular: *A Room of One's Own* (1928) by Virginia Woolf and *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir (18). Further to Todd's observation, Mary Eagleton connects the rise of the new discipline to teaching and publishing:

> the expansion of feminist literary criticism and . . . of courses about women's writing, and the establishment of feminist publishing houses . . . introduced to readers an extensive new area of work: a teacher could no longer use the 'lack of material' argument to explain the absence of women writers from a course. (*Feminist*, 1-2)

These intersecting influences of reading, teaching, and publishing heralded the proliferation of feminist literary criticism in England, Europe, the United States, and Canada. The resulting recognition that, as Barbara Godard says gender is a social construction, "a fundamental organizing category of human experience and the creation of knowledge" (*Gynocritics*, i) that led to the blossoming of feminist scholarship which examines sexual imbalances in literature, social institutions, culture at large.

Elaine Showalter situates the beginning of feminist criticism as the moment when women – whether writers, teachers, students, or readers – started to notice "the limited and secondary roles allotted to fictional heroines [and] women writers and female critics [began] to ask serious questions about their own relation to literary study" (*Literary Theory*, 179). Moving from the universal to the particular, the moment Showalter refers to is 1968, a revolutionary year of turbulence and tumult across the western world, and one that sits at the beginning of second-wave feminism. Backed by training in contemporary literary analysis, early feminist literary critics posed newly formed questions about how male-authored texts represent women and how those representations translate to women's social oppression.

Results and claims derived from feminist approaches have often been discredited as lacking authority, a claim levied because feminism is rooted in the very systems it critiques. *In Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland discuss the difficult tasks that confront feminists who must make decisions about how to "produce and justify" feminist knowledge, because any conclusions they derive from this knowledge are too easily classified as "unscientific, biased, and lacking in authority" (2). Postmodern and poststructural approaches question the stability not only of actual realities and the knowledge that comes out of those realities, but also the notion of method-based research grounded in the so-called real. As a result, the diverse theoretical strains that make up feminist criticism are always unstable: its techniques and procedures come out of ideologically determined parameters and rules that are at odds with its activities. Because feminism in its various forms draws on different theories and epistemologies, all grounded in different intellectual, social, and political experiences, feminists have had difficulties achieving authoritative credibility in wide arenas. As Ramazanoglu and Holland illustrate when they refer to "the long shadow of the Enlightenment" (36), the binaries rooted in the developments of that significant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century period still dominate western thinking, and have gained normative or natural guises because they have been at work for over two hundred years.

While specifics in the form of maps or guidelines explaining how and why women's rights were subordinated to those of men during the very early development of western civilization are largely unavailable, theories about how this imbalance developed do exist. Margaret Walters points to the development of organized religion as a motivating force for women to raise their voices against their diminishing social roles: "some of the first European women to speak out for themselves, and for their sex, did so within a religious framework" (6). Skipping over the eras when the Middle Ages gave way to the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalism, feminist historians often point to Mary Wollstonecraft's late eighteenth-century work as the beginning of modern feminism: Miriam Brody writes that "Mary Wollstonecraft was the first major feminist, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* . . . is the feminist declaration of independence" (ix). However, as Moira Ferguson writes in *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, women had not only long been aware of "the inferior status ascribed to women . . . by the whole fabric of culture and society around them" (1), but they had also been working actively to change the texture of that restrictive cultural fabric for a very long time.

Arguing that the complex Enlightenment period still shapes contemporary social concepts of what constitutes human progress, Michel Foucault writes of its fundamental connection to contemporary western life when he says that "we must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment" (43). Foucault's analysis, however, comes out of a conflicted philosophy that simultaneously absorbs women into a "humanism that serves to color and justify the conceptions of man" (44) and excludes them as not fully engaged participants in that philosophy.

Nevertheless, Foucault's determination that explorations into twentieth-century western subjectivity should be informed by Enlightenment understanding also infers that the imbalanced equity between male and female roles that shaped eighteenth-century community life resulted from both biological and spiritual factors, factors specifically divided between the male and the female, with the male determined by his thinking powers and the female determined by her biology. As Ramazanoglu and Holland explain, French Enlightenment writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues for "a moral difference between the sexes since it is the business of women (provided for by nature and morality) to be mothers" (30). In this line of thinking, because she was invested with the mysterious ability to reproduce the next generation as well as an innate sensitivity to so-called good and bad behaviour, the female could not be firmly situated in predictable, scientific reality. As a result, dominant male forces closed both public positions of power and opportunities to acquire the knowledge to access those positions to all women. Not surprisingly, today's feminist work still strives to understand and reveal the intricacies of power relations and knowledge production; also not surprisingly, this work still struggles for authoritative recognition from its own communities, located as they are in the conditioned heart of the ideologies that produced them. As always, the weapon or tool of choice in this struggle is the pen, or, in today's technologically invested environment, the word processor.

The twentieth-century's much-needed critical investigation into the institution of motherhood was launched by one pen in particular. As Adrienne Rich herself notes, the writing of *Of Woman Born* was a resistance to old ideas, especially the "ascription of a higher intrinsic human value to men than to women" (ix).[23] Rich's text remains fundamental to those that followed, and many soon did. Shortly after *Of Woman Born*, came the two Nancys: Nancy Friday's *My Mother My Self* (1977) and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978). Friday's widely read book,[24] a self-reflexive look into the author's own relationship with her mother, makes wider implications about daughters, mothers, and that patriarchal straitjacket, the "maternal instinct":

> The maternal instinct says we are all born mothers, that once we are mothers we will automatically and naturally love our children and always do what is best for them. If you believe in the maternal instinct and fail at mother love, you fail as a woman. It is a controlling idea that holds us in an iron grip. (33)

Like Friday, Chodorow begins her book with the mother-daughter relationship, but, because she situates her work as a sociological study, the text takes a more scholarly tone and approach than Friday's more intimate contemplation. Yet, even with its intellectual stance, Chodorow acknowledges that her work was inspired by mothers and daughters in the feminist movement and community she was involved in: "many of my ideas were first developed with the members of the mother-daughter group" (vii). *The Reproduction of Mothering* is a generational interrogation that examines how ideals of mothering are perpetuated over time. Its findings argue that, rather than the biological premise Friday describes, the socio-political needs of contemporary Western society are the real basis for its widespread belief in the so-called maternal instinct:

---

[23] This quotation appears in the new introduction Rich wrote for the tenth anniversary edition of her milestone text.

[24] This comment is not based on research into the sales of Friday's book, but rather my own perception. I read it several years after it was published. Many of my friends had read it, and it was featured prominently on bookstore shelves for what seemed to be a long time. Thus, I think of it as a popular culture text that received much attention.

> In Western society, the separation of domestic and public spheres . . . has been sharpened through the course of industrial capitalist development, producing a family form reduced to its fundamentals, to women's mothering and maternal qualities and heterosexual marriage, and continuing to reproduce male dominance. (10)

However, like both Rich and Friday, Chodorow does challenge the idea of an essential maternal instinct, portraying its presence in western culture as a patriarchal ruse that feeds the demographic needs of a rapidly growing materialist society awash in rampant consumerism.

As more maternal investigations were published, the study of motherhood and mothering evolved into another complex discipline within feminism and feminist literary criticism. And, as work compiled in this area, so did criticisms of it. In an eloquent treatise that rivals Rich for landmark status, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), Sara Ruddick takes an informed path back through "epistemological climate changes" (12) to examine ways of thinking about the maternal condition. For Ruddick, the complexities of the ideals associated with mothering derive from an inadequate language with which to examine it, as well as socially constructed categories of identity that work against the maternal condition:

> It is hard to speak precisely about mothering. Overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment, we have no realistic language in

> which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work. War, poverty, and racism twist a mother's best efforts. These are not sorrows brought on by mothering; they are socially caused and politically remediable. (29).

Maternal Thinking progresses through representations of mothering as a thinking discipline for which women are trained by an often unthinking society. As it progresses, Ruddick's text addresses the wider implications and benefits of an autonomous thinking about mothering and becomes noticeably pacifist. Thinking about the realities of maternal life shatters the myth of its aura of a placid, peaceful existence, but creates room for a "feminist maternal peace politics" in which informed thinking about mothering becomes an agent for both social and political change: "a feminist maternal peace politics . . . makes a beginning that, like birth itself, revives human hopes as old and at least as indestructible as war" (251).

Responses to Ruddick's book were and continue to be passionate and personal. A recent conference, sponsored by *The Association for Research on Mothering* (*ARM*), included a talk given by a now-frail Ruddick. This event, *The Motherlode: 10th Anniversary Conference*, was held in Toronto from October 26-29, 2006 to celebrate the ten busy years since *ARM*'s inception. At the conference, Ruddick participated in a session called "Mothering: Resistance and Activism" on October 27. The other speakers in this session were Andrea O'Reilly, Patrice Di Quinzio, Judith Stadtman Tucker, and Loretta Ross. On a busy Friday night in active downtown Toronto, the room was filled to capacity. After all five presenters had spoken, a lively question period ensued, during which the discussion of the evening's insightful presentations was regularly punctuated by spontaneous tributes to Ruddick as many members of the audience stood to talk about the powerful impact *Maternal Thinking* had on their personal and professional lives.

That same impact also influenced subsequent works about mothering, such as Sharon Hays' *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), one of the first works to analyze the idea of "intensive mothering." Pointing out that women are not passive receivers of motherhood ideals, but agents active in shaping those ideals, Hays examines the often paradoxical contradictions that complicate contemporary mothering values:

> Modern-day mothers are facing two socially constructed cultural images of what a good mother looks like. Neither, however, includes the vision of a cold, calculating businesswoman – that title is reserved for childless career women. If you are a good mother, you *must* be an intensive one. (131)

In times of varying representations of mothering that include both traditional stay-at-home moms and supermoms, both of which erroneously suggest that women move between their domestic and professional duties with apparent ease, Hays situates conventional notions of western middle-class motherhood as clearly implicated in the conflicts mothers face daily.

Current discussions about motherhood and mothering are urgent, intense, and at times confusing. The increase in options made possible by the women's movements of the twentieth-century have resulted in critical debates scrutinizing every aspect of maternal situations. In *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering*, Patrice di Quinzio recognizes that the tensions between feminism and mothering must be resolved: while "the issue of mothering often functions as a sort of lightning rod in feminist theory . . . . neither feminism nor feminist theory can afford to ignore the issue of mothering" (xi). For Di Quinzio, both feminism and mothering are dynamic processes that could work together towards a focused future based on diversity and inclusiveness that will result in cultural reform.

Feminist mothering is one such dynamic process. An approach to the maternal situation characterized by plurality and diversity, feminist mothering is "a counter narrative," as Andrea O'Reilly explains in *Rocking the Cradle*, "determined more by what it is not (i.e. patriarchal motherhood) than by what it is" (16). Acknowledging Ruddick's influence, O'Reilly continues her explication of feminist mothering:

> Building upon the work of Sara Ruddick, [feminist] mothers redefine motherwork as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change through new feminist modes of gender socialization and interactions with daughters and sons. (47)

With a goal of cultural change, feminist mothering takes on a monumental task given the overwhelming historical and traditional conditioning that weighs on current prevalent perceptions of both feminism and motherhood. Because artistic literary production has always been at the forefront of all social and political movements, the production of literature by mothers is "a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged" (Jeremiah 7). Thus, interrogation of the literature produced in specific cultural moments and locations for its representations of women's lives, whether feminine or feminist, maternal or non-maternal, is important for its further understanding of the intricate dance women perform to live their lives.

The creative narrative work produced by Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, and Jane Urquhart falls temporally into the postmodern period of Canadian literature.[25] This period of Canadian literature is also characterized by strong writing by women; indeed, the three writers I have chosen for this project are all highly esteemed, nationally and internationally. My list should be longer because Canada is a place of curious readers and prolific writers from all regions and communities.

In *Wild Mother Dancing*, Di Brandt writes that "some of the most interesting examples of maternal narrative are being written by women who, in one way or another, have escaped colonization, and thus write on the very margins of Western discourse" (18). Taking Brandt's version of colonization here to mean patriarchal conventions that rule women's lives, I consider how writers inside these discursive margins refl[illegible] their feminist and maternal subjectivities in their work.

Laurence, Shields and Urquhart are my focus because they fall into that very visible category of Canadian women writers who have achieved widespread recognition. I also choose them because all three are mothers who needed to clear space in their domestic lives to pursue their creative interests. As well, they are all firmly established in the Canadian canon of women writers, their works appearing regularly on high school, college, and university teaching curriculums. As writers, they have negotiated their different relationships with both feminism and motherhood, relationships that play out in the work they have produced.

---

[25] Characteristics of the Canadian postmodern novel include abrupt shifts in time, a preoccupation with the past that reflects current social anxieties, a self-reflexive, metafictional consciousness, diverse intertextual elements, and an overall sense that the reader must assemble its components as if fitting jigsaw puzzle pieces together. Inevitably, one piece is left over or a hole in the puzzle is glaringly evident.

Of the three, only Laurence and Shields have identified themselves publicly as feminists. For Laurence, who has been recognized as "the pioneer in fashioning a place for maternal narrative in Canada" (Brandt 18), this overt identification came at the end of her life, and appears in her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (4). In her fiction, the feminist commentary grows with each work and culminates in her final novel, *The Diviners*. By contrast, Shields spoke about her engagement with feminism, yet the cumulative undercurrent in her work is decidedly un-feminist, because she writes uncritically and optimistically about the state of normative heterosexual families. Shields' last novel, *Unless*, also stands as the culmination of her commentary on conventional women's lives: here she finally wrestles with the connections between women who mother and "goodness," a word that crops up at significant moments in much of her work.

As yet, Urquhart has avoided association with the word "feminist" in interviews. Urquhart's ultimate feminist statement may be yet to come, because she is, of course, the only one among the three who is still adding to her body of work. Among the Laurence, Shields, and Urquhart fictional representations of women's lives, Urquhart depicts a subversive subtle feminism that, thus far, develops in the form of a palimpsest built within her novelistic oeuvre. To fully grasp the feminist subtext of her fiction, especially the early works that ultimately inform those following, the critic must investigate and analyze the historical intertexts.

In my analysis, I use the words "pessimism," "optimism," and "feisty." They are accessible informal words, even informal: I do not use them as literary terms, but instead employ them as vivid descriptions that illustrate a writer's attitude towards her themes, which are, in this instance, feminism and motherhood.

Urquhart's narrative commentary about both feminism and motherhood is pessimistic in the sense that she portrays the maternal condition as self-deterioration. Her novels carry a prevailing implication that, if the current conservative social order continues unchecked, things will get worse not better.

By contrast, Shields' narrative construction of motherhood subscribes to a myth of progress and is decidedly optimistic in the sense that her liberal feminist perspective promises a hopeful confidence. For Shields, society's status quo is for the best and moves towards an ultimate successful resolution for all.

Laurence's representation contrasts with those of both Urquhart and Shields, in that her attitude towards feminism and motherhood is defiant and feisty. Several of her mothering characters not only possess a spirited energy, but are aggressive and forceful when confronted by restrictive limitations. Mothers such as the determined Morag Gunn in Laurence's *The Diviners* or the temporarily anguished Reta Winters of Shields' *Unless* do not appear in Urquhart's novels. Instead, Urquhart's mothers are either absent completely, through distance or death, or socially alienated and in severe psychological distress with pessimistic possibilities for their future.

Writing in a first-person feminist literary critical perspective, Di Brandt formulates her questions about the absent mothers in western literature: "Where, in the rich canon of Western literature, were the mother stories? Where, indeed, were the mothers, symbolic or otherwise, whom I might [. . .] turn to . . .?" (4). As if answering Brandt's queries, Laurence's novels feature female protagonists who either are or become mothers, while Shields' novels always include a main character who struggles with the limitations of domesticity but does not challenge them. Urquhart's novels have both absent and present mothers, at times eliminating the mothers in their stories quickly or relegating them to the background, and at others, dealing primarily with maternal characters and their situations.

Over thirty years have passed since Laurence was in her writing prime, a time concurrent with the social upheavals of the sixties and seventies. Shields' writing career coincided with the last two decades of second-wave feminism, whereas twenty years have elapsed between the publication of Urquhart's first novel (1985) and her latest (2005), time enough for one generation to grow up. Laurence's work tends to reflect a social feminism that examines the economic, labour, and class conditions of women's lives; Shields' fiction, if feminist at all, depicts a liberal feminism in which her characters work from within their ideology to change the conditions of their lives; and Urquhart's fiction has a disconnected postfeminist feel that both returns to the days of first-wave feminism and represents the backlash following the disappointing end of the second-wave. Separately their work presents diverse pictures of white, middle-class women's lives, while, examined together, their work comments on the years in which scholarly feminist perspectives in North America shifted dramatically.

* * *

My bookstore forays usually end in the fiction section where Laurence, Shields, and Urquhart works occupy their alphabetical locations on the shelves with their many other fiction-writing colleagues. As I begin my investigation into the representations of motherhood in prose produced by three of Canada's most well-known and recognized women writers, I bring questions to their texts: Are they feminist writers? How do they, as Canadian mothers, portray mothers in their work? How does any woman who has to reconcile her personal ambitions both with her own situation as a mother and the expectations of those around her about how that mothering should be performed cope with the inevitable clashes this explosive triangle brings? Does their work illustrate any particular brand of Canadian feminism and/or motherhood? How do they represent the intimate antagonists that feminism and motherhood appear to be in their stories?

Drawing from both their fictional texts and, if available, any non-fiction writing they produced about either writing or mothering, my investigation reveals that the above questions are apparent in the ways in which each of these writers narrate both their stories and themselves. Motherhood and feminism intersect at a contentious crossroads, a location of absurdity where, as Patrice DeQuinzio says in *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individuality, and the Problem of Mothering*, "it is impossible for feminist theory to avoid the issue of motherhood, and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it" (xx). Perhaps, if theory cannot be a means to resolution, investigating the intersection of fiction and non-fiction self-writing could be.

Chronological logic suggests that I begin with the earliest works and move through the others to the most recent. However, I choose to reverse that order, and examine Urquhart's work, moving on to Shields, and finishing with Laurence. Reading backwards through time allows me to reflect on the connections between currently produced Canadian fiction and the works that provide the foundation for that fiction. As well, reading Urquhart first offers an opportunity to consider how her work reflects a shift to the right in North American political ideology, a shift that is absent in both

Shields' and Laurence's work. Moreover, given the structure of my dissertation, a body chapter followed by a short memoir, always a production of memory work, logical reasoning suggests that using the looking backwards process of memory in my approach to Urquhart, Shields, and Laurence is consistent with my project.

Initially, the idea for this reverse structure came from three specific works: I read Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* as dependent on Shields' *The Stone Diaries* which, in turn, pays tribute to Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. The connections between these three novels come not only from the rigidity and preservation implied in the stone of each title, but also in each one's commentaries on the living of a female life. Reading Urquhart for its feminist contexts requires intertextual investigation and subtext analysis. However, her novels all feature intriguing, and differing, representations of patriarchal motherhood. Urquhart takes a decidedly pessimistic view of this idealized institution, with most of her maternal characters suffering either from being overly invested in traditional mothering roles, or struggling to find their autonomous selves amid social disapproval or alienation. Urquhart's mothers are often alone, in stress, and then written out of the narrative. Carol Shields, on the other hand, develops her maternal characters in a decidedly optimistic framework despite their difficulties in managing to tend their families appropriately while simultaneously nurturing their creative enterprises. For Shields's characters, the endings are usually satisfying, if not downright happy, usually safely ensconced within a traditional heterosexual marriage-type relationship, whereas Urquhart's characters are at times left alone, or with fates unknown. Turning to Laurence last, through both Urquhart's and Shields' work, reveals an entirely different take on motherhood. Laurence's maternal characters are neither pessimistic nor optimistic; indeed, the most appropriate word to describe them would be feisty. Whether dealing with their own difficult mothers or finding their independent selves in the midst of their mothering duties, Laurence's characters, despite their creation at the onset of second wave feminism, illustrate early representations of feminist mothering, "a conscious political strategy [mothers] use to bring about social change in their lives and the lives of their children" (Green 7).

The walk from the fiction section to the Women's Studies section in most bookstores is not particularly long, but the ideological distances are worth considering. The disparate marketing methods used by bookstores to determine the placing of books about feminism and motherhood raise puzzling questions that float in and around the investigation of the primary texts in my project. As noted, the particular works I referred to at the beginning of this introduction (by Rowe-Finkbeiner, Chesler, Dowd, Crittenden, and Peskowitz) are all American. Living and thinking in Canada, I wonder if and how Canadian attitudes towards feminism and motherhood differ from and/or are shaped by our overwhelming neighbour to the south. As a white, middle-class, middle-aged Canadian woman who is also a mother, I seek a particularly Canadian form of feminism and/or motherhood.

Canadians practicing feminist literary criticism, situated somewhere in between the differing discursive activities of American feminism and its European counterpart, have been highly influenced by the singular characteristics and trajectories of both international communities. Nevertheless, Canadian feminism differs from American, British, and European feminism, all areas of the world directly and intimately connected with Canada both today and historically. Judy Rebick positions Canadian feminism ahead of its American counterpart in that by the time Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, "Canadians had been reading about [the] 'problem with no name' for some time" because Doris Anderson,[26] editor of *Chatelaine* magazine, had been publishing "feminist articles long before the mainstream had a notion of the women's movement to come" (5). With Anderson taking control of what was arguably Canada's most prominent women's magazine in 1957, *Chatelaine* expanded its horizons: in her autobiography, *Rebel Daughter*, Anderson explains that she decided to "give my readers something serious to think about, something to shake them up a little, and adds that she had "definite ideas about the direction [the] transformation should take" (150). From popular culture publications such as *Chatelaine* to widely read and studied literary works such as those created by Laurence, Shields, and Urquhart, I look for a particularly Canadian form of feminism that engages in a negotiated relationship with particular Canadian representations of motherhood.

The following chapters take up feminism and motherhood in the works of my three selected fiction writers. As already noted, following each chapter is a short autobiographical afterword. Perhaps "autobiographical" is not the right word to describe these passages; perhaps they could more accurately be called anecdotal, in that they relate a series of connected incidents from my life that have been instrumental in shaping not only my current self but my academic thinking. Looking backwards to these moments has been a regular occurrence as I have negotiated my way through the life-changing explosive material that has constituted my research.

---

[26] I write these words on the morning of March 2, 2007. In the afternoon, I learn of Doris Anderson's death this day in Toronto at age 85.

Whether anecdotal, memoir, or autobiographical, the five personal passages I include in this dissertation are intended to connect different ways of thinking, to, as Jane Gallop says in *Anecdotal Theory*, loosen the grip that the "mastery of theory" has on academic writing and force "us to keep thinking even when the dominance of our thought is far from assured" (15). As a whole, my desire for this project is to contextualize the connections between feminism, motherhood, and the singular experiences of a life lived, infusing them with the self-reflexive impetus that leads readers and writers, mothers and feminists, women and men to question the ideological waters they swim in every day.

Afterword to the Introduction: In Medias Res

Although Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex *made its appearance in France the same year I was born, I would remain unfamiliar with it for more than forty years. When Betty Friedan's revealing book about the North American housewife,* The Feminine Mystique, *was published in 1963, I was watching The Beatles on* The Ed Sullivan Show *and babysitting my four younger siblings. Mary Ellman's examination of femininity and its stereotypes,* Thinking about Women, *never came into my hands in 1968; neither did* Sexual Politics, *Kate Millett's 1969 investigation into the ideologies of sexual representation, or* The Female Eunuch, *Germaine Greer's 1970 contemplation of female sexuality.*

I hardly noticed when, in Paris, France, students and workers joined together in May of 1968 in stunning rebellion against the status quo, refusing officially-sanctioned knowledge, seeking instead new ways of knowing more connected to the pain and conflict of the lived human condition.[1] *I took a little more notice that same year of the assassinations in the United States that claimed both Dr. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and could not miss the vivid news reports as the contentious Vietnam War raged on. But I was unaware that in New York, charter organizers of the fledgling National Organization for Women (NOW) were actively canvassing for new members, meeting in a small Manhattan room filled with second-hand furniture and blue-jean clad women.*[2] *Nor did I know that in Canada, women's groups were springing up in the east and the west, beginning with the 1967 establishment of the Toronto Women's Liberation*

---

[1] Sherry Turkle writes about the 1968 events in Paris in these terms in *Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution* (72). As well, Toril Moi comments on the same moment in political terms in her introduction to *The Kristeva Reader* (4-6).

[2] For more information on the genesis of NOW, see Susan Brownmiller's *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (5).

Movement, and followed soon by Simon Fraser University's The Feminine Action League, and Vancouver's Women's Caucus.[3] *For me, the women's movement was all about the birth control pill. My naïve teenaged assessment of the first ripples of second-wave feminism was that women finally had sexual freedom.*

I was completely in the dark about the intellectual gains women were making at the time. A burgeoning amount of critical work produced by female thinkers, many of whom had fought for and found admittance into the male-dominated realm of English literature academia, had led to the development of a new discipline in theoretical analysis: feminist literary criticism. This new discipline developed as a direct result of the international women's movement, and disrupted the notion that the assumed reader, writer, and critic of literature was male,[4] *a thought that had never crossed my teenaged mind even as I read through book after book after book. While new ideas stirred everywhere else in the world, in my snug little life, I was completely absorbed in myself.*

I'm not saying that I lived in a vacuum. I didn't. I just swam in the ideological waters of my community, but didn't even realize I was swimming, much less what the water was like. I was completely unaware that, in intellectual circles on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, critical approaches to literary theory were exploding in response to many stimuli, not the least of which was the American civil rights movement of the early 1960s. News reports occasionally featured examples of early second-wave feminism as it began its rise to the front pages of the 1970s; although I did read the newspapers that came daily to our house, I must have focused my attention on the comics and movie

---

[3] **This information is also found in Judy Rebick's *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (8).**

[4] **The beginnings of feminist literary criticism are well covered by Elaine Showalter in the introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (3-10).**

reviews. In retrospect I see that, at the end of what we, my friends and I, all thought was a worldly high school experience, I was largely distanced from, and uninformed about, feminism and its ramifications for my life. I say now with certainty that, had there been a Canadian equivalent of a landmark feminist text published during those years, I might have heard about it but I doubt that I would have read it. All the landmark second wave feminist works escaped my attention when they were first published, because I was in a different space and place, busy launching my life as an adult far away from my Manitoba home, trying to see a little of the world while working as an x-ray technician in Glasgow, Scotland.

The seventies were busy years for me. By the time Adrienne Rich's ground-breaking work about motherhood and mothering, Of Woman Born, *was published in 1976, I was a mother myself, living in Alberta, my time occupied at home with three very young children. Any reading I might have been doing then would have been related to child care, vegetarian cooking, or* The Cat in the Hat. *All in all, although somewhat sleep-deprived, I was living fairly contentedly in a youthful cocoon, still feeling like I could do anything I wanted to with my life.*

As cocoons do, mine disintegrated, slowly, but inevitably. Emerging from it led me on an erratic path to where I am now. Looking simultaneously at the unknown direction my path seems to be taking and back to the now known direction it came from, I think of my life today as my own "in medias res." At age 57, I know that I'm being optimistic in thinking that my life is only half over, but I prefer it that way. Besides, I see my situation of being in my life's "medias res" as not simply being in the middle of *things, but instead, at yet another beginning that eventually changes both the outset I remember and the end I inexorably move towards.*

Always intrigued by the ambiguity of words, I have spent much time in my life reading and writing. Over the years, I've produced awkward, predictable poetry; intense bursts of journal writing and anecdote; unwieldy short stories featuring characters that all ended up looking like mirror images of me; and weird little screenplays, all with plots featuring women somehow conflicted about their situation as mothers or non-mothers. Occasionally I would send one of my creations off to various publications; always, in return, I received ever-so-polite rejection letters.

My screenplays were better than my other writing. I knew this because I received nicer rejection letters in response to them and even the occasional letter of interest. One of my short scripts won a drama prize in 1995 and I was able to make it into a bad ten minute film with a few wonderful moments in it. Motivated by that modest success, I continued writing, and was elated when my first feature-length screenplay attracted the interest of a Los Angeles production company. Working with some of their development people, I re-wrote it according to their suggestions. After reading the finished product they had orchestrated, their production department declined to take the finished script further. It fell into what is known in the industry as "development hell" and I fell into a state of, if not despair, then certainly mild dejection. The workings of both the Canadian and American film industries, vastly different entities that they are, remain alien to me still.

I didn't really know what I was going to do with my writing, but I did know that once writing was part of my life, I couldn't stop. In need of some kind of income, I *continued developing ideas while I worked as a stills photographer in the Alberta film industry. An odd workplace, the film industry has an aura of glamour from the outside that dissipated almost as soon as I stepped inside its sphere. Filled with individuals trying to make themselves stand out in an environment that is all about being highly visible, film crews are at once fascinating and tedious. I spent hours standing around waiting for a few minutes of intense work that lead immediately to yet another long wait. During these extended periods of standing around, I watched, thought, and wrote down ideas. Thus, when Premier Ralph Klein killed that industry in Alberta during the deficit onslaught he unleashed in the mid-nineties, I was ready to make yet another change.*

And so I returned to university at age forty-six. My aim was to finish an undergraduate degree I had started twenty-two years earlier after the birth of my eldest daughter. When she was not yet a year old, I strapped her into the pack she loved to ride in, adjusted it squarely on my back, and walked up the hill to the University of New Brunswick campus, where I registered myself as a BA student and my daughter as a participant in the developmental psychology's day care.

The following year, having successfully completed my first-year courses, but pregnant again, I moved to Edmonton with my husband and twenty-month old baby. I planned to continue my education by registering at the University of Alberta as soon as my daughter's new sibling was born. That sibling unexpectedly turned out to be twins, and I delayed my university plans to become a stay-at-home mom. Three years later I divorced, and two years after that, married again. Bearing yet another new last name, I combined motherhood with an outside job, becoming what was then known, in the overtly redundant terms of the times, as a "working" mom.

Despite the extended daily tribulations associated with raising them, in most cases, children do manage to reach adulthood, and my children have thankfully flourished over the years. When they were old enough to go to university, I went with them. I planned to do a degree in Film Studies, after which I would go back to that Los Angeles production company with a perfected script and show them what they passed up. But, as has happened often in my life, what I planned to do was not what I did. In my second year back at university, I registered for a literary theory course, having absolutely no idea what it was going to be about. I just liked the sound of it and it fit into my schedule.

The course turned out to be a survey that ran the gamut of literary thinking: from formalism to structuralism to deconstruction to gender theory to sexuality to feminism. From day one, I was awash in words and thoughts. Confused and destabilized. Appalled and mesmerized. I found myself suddenly acutely aware of the dilemmas of second-wave feminism, not yet realizing that my moment of realization was in the midst of the more current third-wave. The professor was engaging, informed, dynamic, and highly adept at conveying optimistic comfort while simultaneously exploding her students' minds with each new section. And she wore great shoes.

At the end of that course, I was hooked and changed my program to major in English. With my first degree finally firmly in my hands, I applied for graduate school. My children have all long since graduated from university, each successfully attaining her or his degree. Ten years later after I followed them to campus, I'm still here, working on my third.

Chapter One:

Absent Flowers and Gothic Narrators:

Feminism, Mothers, and Motherhood in Jane Urquhart's Novels

Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart is not known as a feminist writer. Indeed, in published interviews to date, the words "feminist" or "feminism" have not been used at all by the interviewers and only rarely by Urquhart. The absence of this topic in Urquhart interviews is likely a symptom of a late twentieth-century North American "backlash" against a feminist movement that "proved [to be] women's own worst enemy" (Faludi x). Nevertheless, feminist undercurrents are subtly present in Urquhart's carefully considered responses. Speaking with Geoffrey Hancock in 1985 after the publication of her first novel, *The Whirlpool*, Urquhart responded to Hancock's query as to whether women have "different sensibilities as writers" with the following observation: "what I hope feminism has done for me is that it has allowed me access to the male of the species as people and as thinkers in a way that is not confused by sexual issues" (39). Diverting the focus of the question to the "male of the species," Urquhart neatly and diplomatically sidestepped women's gender issues and the feminist associations that go along with them.

In later Urquhart interviews, feminist concerns are still absent from the main conversations, but they do arise as tangents out of other topics. For instance, in an interview with Laura Ferri published in 1999, Urquhart meanders through comments about how she is "not as interested in the present as [she] is in the past" (150), how she "recycles material" (152), and how her "interest [is] with obsession and with obsessed people" (153). She eventually arrives at a point where she observes that she was attracted to landscape architecture "because it was so organized, so ordered" (154). This observation about order leads her to talk about the French formal gardens that are the subject of her second book of poetry, *The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan*: "While I am a great admirer of those gardens, I began to realize that it was a masculine approach to design and beauty and that the masculine approach had to do with control" (155). A few years later, in an interview with *History Television*'s Deanna McFadden, Urquhart reflects on Klara Becker, the female protagonist of her fifth novel, *The Stone Carvers*, commenting that " [Klara] seemed to me to be interested in participating in the male world of employment and independence, and yet aware that that same world could render her dependent and unemployed (at least by traditional standards)." Well aware that much narrative content is intuitive – Urquhart admits that she is "never certain that anything at all about my writing is conscious" (*History Television*) – Urquhart nevertheless suggests, with her references linking order to masculine control and female economic dependence to employment limitations, that, although she writes within an ideology of "traditional standards," a strong undercurrent of feminist content and context informs her writing.

While feminism is largely present only as a subtext of Urquhart interviews, the topic of mothers and mothering does directly come into a few of these conversations. A humorous anecdote begins a 2003 *Publishers Weekly* interview conducted by Beverley Slopen, who records that Urquhart's daughter, at age eight or nine, depicted her home life in a school assignment in the following way: "What do you think it would be like to live in a house where your mother is downstairs dancing with drunken poets and your father is outside in his studio painting open graves?" (Slopen). Demonstrating that she may have inherited both her mother's powers of observation and her intuitive writing abilities, young Emily Urquhart illustrates the autobiographical impetus that motivates much narrative creation and analysis, an impetus her mother recognizes. In a short personal essay, "Returning to the Village," Urquhart writes of her own birth as a writer a few years after her daughter was born, an incarnation that took place as the family spent a year in a small town in France:

> Because my husband worked each day in a studio which was separate from the house and my daughter attended *École Maternelle*, I had been, during the daylight hours, always alone in my explorations. It was the place where the writer in me—such as she is—was born. (8)

Urquhart's reflection links her birth as a writer with her duties as a mother and indicates how, for a mother, writing often must take place in a space, the ethereal, if not literal, "room of one's own" that Virginia Woolf so famously dictated as a female writer's necessity.[1] When Urquhart returns to that same village several years later, a local villager remembers her "mostly because of the 'petite fille' who had sometimes accompanied [her] in the past" (9), illustrating how closely linked a woman's identity is to the presence or absence of children in her life whether those children are physically present or in the remembered past.

After the *Publishers Weekly* article made its appearance, in a subsequent interview with Herb Wyile, Jane Urquhart returns again to the importance of the past in her writing, referring directly to the storytelling skills of both her mother and her grandmother as inspiration: "multidimensional . . . a narrative . . . whereas the present is something you're experiencing . . . the past is a story being told . . . [that] takes on a different tone and a different shade" (Wyile 59). While those "tones" and "shades" are reflected in the diverse themes and elements present in Urquhart's novels, they are also available as subtextual nuggets derived through intuition and imagination, and open to interpretation. Perhaps because the topic of history has come up so often in connection with Urquhart's novels, Wyile asks Urquhart a long unasked question: "Do you feel a need to redress a kind of gender imbalance in representations of the past, essentially to put women back into history?" (83) As she so often does in interviews, Urquhart responds with elusiveness and ambiguity. Carefully claiming that she is not the person to enact this redress, Urquhart succinctly replies that "Women have always had a history, of course, but I believe that they should be put into official history" (83).

---

[1] Asked to speak about women and fiction, Woolf famously created her often quoted text *A Room of One's Own* in which she not only posits that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (3), but also that fiction "is likely to contain more truth than fact" (4), pointing to a distinction between truth and fact often left unexplored.

As in her interviews, feminist issues in Urquhart's novels are not immediately obvious; they have to be rooted out. Nevertheless, Urquhart sets in place the foundations of a feminist commentary on women's social dilemmas in general, and motherhood in particular, in her very first novel, *The Whirlpool*. Essentially, the novel has four protagonists, two female and two male, with the third-person limited perspective shifting erratically among them. *The Whirlpool*'s feminist foundation is most notably present in two of the novel's overt intertextual elements: Robert Browning's *The Ring and The Book* and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*. Both are nineteenth-century narrative poems that represent diametrically opposed versions of the impact of marriage and motherhood on women's lives, and, in *The Whirlpool*, serve to establish a narrative pattern of instrumental underlayers that anticipate and set up the feminist subtext of each subsequent novel.

In her first two novels, *The Whirlpool* (1986) and *Changing Heaven* (1990), Urquhart deals with inherited social conventions that affected the transition from nineteenth-century Victorian feminine ideals to women's lives in twentieth-century Canada. Urquhart's third novel, *Away* (1993), combines the Latin-American influences of magic realism[2] with what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction," works she defines as narrative that comments on both the nature of fiction itself and "the imaginative reconstruction of [the historical] process" (92).[3] In *Away*, Urquhart explores the oral tradition of storytelling through four generations of female voices, and in doing so draws on the storytelling inspiration she found in both her mother and her grandmother.

In her Governor-General Award-winning fourth novel, *The Underpainter* (1997), Urquhart takes up a theme of women as the non-agential subjects of artistic works, always rendered by the male gaze and hand, objects of art rather than producers of art. That non-agential subject becomes the artist in her fifth novel, *The Stone Carvers* (2001), in which Urquhart depicts a talented female sculptor disguised as a man in order to participate in the creative process that was the building of the First World War Vimy Ridge Memorial in France. Moving from the arenas of art and war to business, Urquhart's recent sixth novel, *A Map of Glass* (2005), explores Lake Ontario's nineteenth-century shipbuilding industry through the Woodman family, a generational history in which a daughter is excluded, typically for the times, from the patriarchal inheritance process. Urquhart parallels that period narrative, as she often does in her work, with a contemporary story in which a young artist has difficulty reconciling the memory of his parents' difficult marriage with his desire for an eccentric young woman who has engagingly entered his life.

---

[2] M. H. Abrams describes magic realism as a term "used to describe the prose fiction . . . [that] interweave[s], in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism . . . with fantastic and dreamlike elements" (135). I refer to this characteristic as Latin-American because it is often associated with the creative works of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges and Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

[3] Hutcheon further comments that "historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction" (93).

As a body of work, Urquhart's novels reflect contemporary tensions that still hover around western society's notions of female behaviour. This chapter investigates Urquhart's six novels for their feminist subtexts, their representations of mothering, and the connections between the two. I begin by demonstrating how specific intertextual elements in Urquhart's first two novels, *The Whirlpool* and *Changing Heaven*, establish a feminist commentary beneath the narrative surface. Then I show how the subsequent four novels build on that subtext with increasingly varied representations that not only illustrate how economic dependence and limited employment opportunities contained women's lives in the past, but also how that past still governs values and beliefs about mothering and motherhood in contemporary Canadian life. Finally, I link the pessimistic tone of feminist and mothering commentary in Urquhart's novels to the contrasting tone of optimism that prevails in those by Carol Shields.

* * *

Although a precise definition of the diverse field of feminist literary criticism is difficult both to find and to write, for Annette Kolodny, writing in 1980, its purpose is more readily apparent, because

> it involve[s] exposing the sexual stereotyping of women in both our literature and our literary criticism and, as well, demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical schools and methods to deal fairly or sensitively with works written by women. (171)

Urquhart's early novels subtly trace the trajectory of the development of feminist literary criticism from the 1970s to today. Her first and second novels are dependent on previous, often canonical, literary works: Coventry Patmore's *The Angel of the House*, Robert Browning's *The Ring and The Book*, and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* are three prominent examples of the intertextual components Urquhart uses in her early narratives. Through these primary intertexts, both *The Whirlpool* and *Changing Heaven* function to do the work Kolodny writes about, the exposing of sexual stereotypes in canonical literary works and the work involved in finding adequate means to investigate significant representations of women in male writing and similarly examine, comparable or otherwise, significant representations in female writing.

In "Feminism and Literature," Elaine Showalter refers to the intertextual links that exist between original and subsequent texts as the basis for a "female literary tradition" (189). Actively involved in writing through and about the development of feminist literary criticism during the last thirty years of the twentieth century, Showalter reflects, in 1998, on the development of feminist thought by quoting herself from the 1970s: she considers the continuities that exist and survive during periods of great shifts in thought, and maintains that "women's writing is always at least bi-textual [. . .] a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one" (*Novel* 402). Showalter points out that feminist literary criticism with its focus on female writers did not achieve "institutional legitimacy" (405) until the early 1980s, just about the time Urquhart would have been imagining and beginning to shape *The Whirlpool*, a novel that enacts in narrative form the activity for which feminist literary critics had only begun to garner recognition.

In "Twenty Years On: *A Literature of Their Own* Revisited," Showalter says the initial work of feminist criticism "focused on re-discovery" (402), an activity represented in Urquhart's choices of epigraphs for her first two novels. In her second novel, *Changing Heaven*, female-authored poetic epigraphs introduce each of the novel's three sections: *Changing Heaven*'s three epigraphs are from poems by Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, and Stevie Smith, while *The Whirlpool*'s opening epigraph is from "The Swimmer's Moment" by Margaret Avison. Urquhart's epigraph choices highlight the sustained presence of each novel's primary intertext. In *Changing Heaven* (Urqhart's second novel), the epigraphs augment the main intertext, Bronte's *Wuthering Heights,* in that Dickinson and Smith followed in Bronte's wake as female writers in a male-dominated field. However, in *The Whirlpool* (Urqhart's first novel), with the exception of its opening epigraph from Avison's poem, the literary intertexts are predominantly male-authored works. The shift between that aspect of *The Whirlpool* to *Changing Heaven*'s focus on female-authored works parallels the early work of feminist literary criticism as it examined works generated by both genders for representations of women and femininity.

In *The Whirlpool,* Urquhart depicts the conflicts produced when literary representations of late nineteenth-century women raise difficult questions for female readers, often women who fruitlessly search for themselves in the traditional male literary cánon with its socially cultivated expectations of idealized wives existing within the confines of traditional patriarchal marriage paradigm. Thus, *The Whirlpool's* preoccupation with intertextual elements is a narrative strategy that activates its feminist activity and situates the novel firmly in the arena of feminist intertextuality. As Casie Hermansson writes in her foreword to *Reading Feminist Intertextuality Through Bluebeard Stories*, "not all intertextuality is 'good' intertextuality, as far as the reader goes" (v). Hermansson goes on to explain that some intertextual elements perpetuate and promote normative ideological assumptions, and that a feminist intertextual approach functions to reveal these subversions. *The Whirlpool's* intertextual elements give the novel a subtext that fulfills Graham Allen's call for "feminist reappraisal and transformation" (148). Largely through its intertextual elements, *The Whirlpool* establishes the groundwork for a feminist reading of Urquhart's collective narrative work in that it situates its these elements in a polyphonic[4] discussion that is both revisionist and reflective.

Illustrating Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's argument that "contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority . . . because their eighteenth and nineteenth-century forbears struggled in isolation" (25), Urquhart sets her first novel in the Niagara Gorge region of southern Ontario in 1889. The novel's intricate format consists of alternating narratives between two separate stories: Fleda McDougal and her military historian husband, David, who, while spending the summer living in a tent on the site where they plan to build a house overlooking a turbulent whirlpool in the Niagara River, befriend a strange young poet who frequents the woods in and around their property; and Maud Grady, a young widow with an autistic child, who struggles to make her way as the owner/operator of the funeral home she inherits when her husband and his parents die in an influenza epidemic.

---

[4] I use the term 'polyphonic' in the Bakhtinian sense of a novel in which no narrative voice has vested authority over other voices. This sense comes from Bakhtin's definition of a novel as "a diversity of social speed types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262).

Urquhart isolates her main characters from each other – Fleda and Maud never meet – but she does give them a shared strategy for dealing with their lives: reading and writing. Through these characters, Urquhart's narrative illustrates how writing and reading have been, and continue to be, crucial ways in which women cope with the singular obsessions and cultural conflicts that not only influence and impact their identities, but also confuse and restrict them. Maud keeps a small untitled book in which she carefully documents the characteristics and possessions of the anonymous floaters who do not survive the Niagara River's whirlpool and eventually are brought to her funeral home. Out by the banks of the river, Fleda regularly sits down with her pen to record her daily life in her diary, often commenting directly on her responses to the book she has just put down:

> *In my twenty-seventh year and in good health I return to the Heights for the first time this year, and I begin again my summer diary.*
>
> *D. [David McDougal] has given me another book to read this morning – Angel in the House by Patmore. A tribute to the poet's wife and her domestic demeanour. Just the ticket, D. says, since he thinks I am dangerously infatuated with the strange passions of Mr. Browning.*

> *Which, I suppose, I am.* (34)

This, the first of Fleda's diary entries to appear in *The Whirlpool*, immediately sets up the oppositional forces at play in Fleda's reading activities. Having taken a supply of books with her to her summer tent home, Fleda alternates between reading Patmore and Browning. Her husband wants her to read a book that will influence her in the proper "domestic demeanour," and is highly suspicious of what he calls Browning's "strange passions," passions that Fleda admits do intrigue her, although she does not pause to say why. Nevertheless, because Fleda records her responses as inquisitive reader in her diary, she allows *The Whirlpool's* readers to share and speculate on those responses, including her desire for "the spiritual marriage of romance and domesticity in her life" (30). Fleda's diarized insights and David's resistance to them indicate how private, personal acts, such as reading a book and writing in a diary, become symbolically political and function to subvert exploitation. As Judith Fetterley observes, the power of reading is in the individual response to the consumed text: in "Reading About Reading," Fetterley notes "how politicized the act of reading is in a sexist culture" (151). Importantly, this politicization is common to both acts of writing and reading, in that intertextual narrative strategies often situate foundation texts very differently from how the original works were both written and read.

Conventional female behaviour is the subject of the books Fleda reads during *The Whirlpool*'s narrative: Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book.* These two texts establish two very different, but connected in conflict, representations of the conditions of women's lives in the nineteenth century. Over two thousand lines long, *The Angel in the House* (1854) is an idyllic tale of pious, honourable, Victorian love. The poem follows its main characters, Felix and Honoria, through their meeting, courtship, and marriage. Allegorical in name and metaphorical in behaviour, Honoria is, of course, the angel who provides emotional, moral, and spiritual guidance to her family, above all her husband. Hovering over the family domain, this angelic pleaser is the epitome of the idealized wife who sets her personal needs, desires, or ambitions aside to be available constantly to tend to those same concerns in the lives of her husband and children.

The Angel in the House has been connected to the feminist movement on several occasions. Its important appearance in Virginia Woolf's "Professions for Women," in which Woolf advocates that the angel must be killed in order for a woman writer to win her "battle with the phantoms of the literary past" (Freiwald 539), was not the poem's first manifestation as an implement for or against the struggle for women's rights. Patmore's poetic narrative was not an immediate success when it was first published in 1854, but it was revived later in that century, invoked as a positive symbol for the patriarchal status quo by those against the rising call for women's rights, those contentious "ideas that came into a particularly sharp focus in the 1840s, ideas vital to the debate of the Woman Question" (Freiwald 545). Married women in the nineteenth century had no public status other than being what, in 1869, John Stuart Mill called "the primitive state of slavery" (6) in which "every woman . . . was found in a state of bondage to some man" (7), a state of indenture binding them almost without recourse to those who controlled their lives: their husbands. For Mill, the angel was no more than a slave, legally held through the laws of marriage, the institution he refers to as "the only actual bondage" left in western society, one in which "there remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house" (86). Mill's feminist writing pre-dates the word 'feminist' itself, and, as Susan Moller Okin notes in her introduction to the 1988 edition of Mill's text, *The Subjection of Women* attracted much attention as soon as it was published, causing a turmoil that included "more negative reaction than anything else Mill wrote" (v).

Similar to the contentious reaction that followed the publication of Mill's women-as-slaves argument, and from its first published appearance to the present day, Patmore's *The Angel in the House* has been on the receiving end of both dismissive criticism and rapturous praise, responses which have involved a variety of approaches, both stylistic and ideological. Ian Anstruther notes that some initial reviewers attacked its story as "much too slight" and its form as "repetitive and boring" (76), while others lauded its representation of "maidenly pride" (77). In the midst of rising conflict between the two heated factions of the controversial debates about women's roles in Victorian society, those who sided against what can be seen as early first-wave feminist demands for more equitable women's rights deployed Patmore's angel as a symbol of the woman glorified in the home, "a priestess in charge of a shrine, at which was laid the daily offering – the money earned by the striving spouse" (Anstruther 7).

This cosseted "priestess" hovers over both female narratives in *The Whirlpool*. Each is significant because Fleda realizes that Patmore's angel is something she cannot and will not be, while, back in town, managing her business and her child, Maud's angel is the self-image she once fulfilled, a rigid wrap around her life that tragic circumstances have given her the opportunity to shed, an opportunity she did not seek, but embraces when it happens. Maud's life before the deaths of her husband Charles and his parents is that of an idle angel: other than working "garlands of flowers onto a piece of unbleached cotton" (43) and quietly sipping tea while the mourning business of the household enterprise takes place around her, Maud's main task was to produce her only child. However, when the three other adults in the house become ill, Maud slides into the ministering angel role, and nurses them to their final rests.

While Maud is surviving as a business owner, out at the whirlpool clearing, Fleda reads Patmore's depiction of the ideal angelic wife and considers the consequences of shaping her life to that paradigm. The content of what she says out loud in conversations with her husband and what she thinks to herself as she reads provides evidence that Fleda is thinking deeply about her wifely situation. Out loud, Fleda says to David that "it must be uphill work being an angel…maybe she died of ennui" (52). When he presses her to choose whether she would rather be Patmore's wife or Laura Secord,[5] Fleda outwardly evades the question, replying, "I have no house to be an angel in" (52), but inwardly asks herself, as the Browning poem she quotes in her diary indicates: "Do I live in a house you would like to see?" (36). Fleda's diary commentary show the conflict swirling beneath her calm exterior demeanour. Acknowledging her deep interest in "the poet's perception of the perfect wife, [and] his belief in matrimony as the heavenly ideal" (33), Fleda tries to take up Patmore's slim volume, but her eager anticipation soon dissipates. Setting the book aside, she takes up her pen instead, writing in her diary that her husband feels Browning's work causes her to think about "angels beating their wings at the edge of the whirlpool in vain" (35). In contrast to her glib verbal answer to David's question about whom she would rather be, Fleda admits in her diary that she would not be Patmore's angel, "not now, not ever" (54).

---

[5] Another narrative stream in the novel revolves around David's work as a military historian. His official interest is in the War of 1812 with a special emphasis on the Battle of Lundy Lane. However, his personal investment is a quirky fetish he has for Laura Secord, the woman who walked miles to warn of an impending American attack, and who enters David's dreams regularly. For commentary on Laura Secord's place in the Canadian imagination, see Christine Boyko-Head's "Laura Secord Meets the Candyman: The Image of Laura Secord in Popular Culture."

Given Robert Browning's status as one of the most important canonized poets of the Victorian age, the presence of his huge narrative poem in *The Whirlpool* as both a visible artifact and a subtextual influence is not surprising. When Patrick, the strange, doomed poet who will have such an impact on the timbre of Fleda and David's summer by the river, first sees Fleda, she is reading Browning:

> Through the glasses [Patrick] could see the wisps of hair, which had escaped the bun at the back of her neck, play around her forehead and cheeks in the breeze. She lifted one hand from the cover of the book in order to turn a page. "My God," Patrick whispered as the title was revealed – *The Ring and the Book* by Robert Browning. . . . he watched the woman now with intense curiosity, scrutinizing the details of her dress, the rings on her slender hands, taking note of the lace on her collar, the gold band on her left hand. (39)

Because Urquhart clearly portrays Fleda holding and reading Browning's *The Ring and The Book*, the significance is not only the connection between the ring Fleda wears on her hand and the ring of the Browning title, but also *The Ring and The Book*'s story, implicitly present within Urquhart's tale.

In writing *The Ring and the Book*, Browning rescued a seventeenth-century child-bride named Pompilia and her disastrous story from a pile of dusty old yellow documents he discovered one June day in a Florentine bookstall. Browning brings Pompilia's silenced voice to life in this work. Whereas Patmore's angel is protected and glorified in the safe haven of her domestic domain, Browning's Pompilia is a teenaged wife abused and subsequently murdered, along with both her parents, by her middle-aged husband, the failed aristocrat Guido Franceschini. Arrested along with his henchmen shortly after the murders, Guido is then brought before the Roman justice system to answer, not for his murderous actions, but to resolve whether Pompilia's position as his marital property justifies the brutal assassinations. Whereas Patmore's Angel represents marriage as a glowing realm where women are safely sequestered from the outside world so that they can dedicate their lives to the moral and spiritual health of their families, Browning's Pompilia represents child-brides sold into marriages of emotional and physical abuse from which they cannot escape because the dominant social institutions of church and state situate daughters as property, not people. As Ann Brady observes, Browning "sees a message for his own age in the Franceschini murder case" (94). So, too, does Urquhart convey the importance of reminding her late-twentieth-century readers of the same message in a time when the tragic results of domestic violence still abound and are regularly featured as headline news stories.

Although two hundred years separate Pompilia's story from Browning's lifetime, Browning recognized that the cultural heritage contained in this historic episode was still functioning in his Victorian age, a recognition that contrasts with other evidence from his life that "Browning was no feminist . . . . [and] near the end of his long career, was actually considering a five-act play against women's suffrage" (Brady 1). Whether Browning's work can be considered feminist or not, Urquhart's move to include *The Ring and The Book* in her novel does have important feminist implications. While an actual characterization of Pompilia does not appear in *The Whirlpool*, by placing the Browning book prominently in Patrick's fieldglass view, with Fleda's wedding ring hovering on top of it, Urquhart illustrates that those cultural legacies live long and travel across oceans of water and time to infuse their effects and affects into new societies.

As with all her novels, at the end of *The Whirlpool*, Urquhart acknowledges the sources for the creative inspiration that led to her first novel; notable among these sources is Julia Cruikshank's *Whirlpool Heights: The Dream-House on the Niagara River*, first published in 1915, an autobiographical account of Cruikshank's spring, summer, and early autumn of 1904. The hypotextual influence this book has on *The Whirlpool* is clearly evident from the first page; indeed, Urquhart's novel is unlikely to exist in its present form had Cruikshank's text not existed and found its way into Urquhart's hands. Margaret E. Turner comments that "Urquhart's reading/rewriting of Cruikshank's texts puts the two into a fascinating intertextual relationship" (103); this relationship is fascinating because of the integration of the woman writer and the woman reader from two different eras, an integration that sees Cruikshank (and her readers) and Urquhart (and her readers) communicating with each other, informing each other, and interrogating the available interpretations of their positions as writers/readers.

Written in diary form, Cruikshank begins with the very piece of land that is *The Whirlpool*'s setting: "On the 18th of December, 1904, E. gave me the deed of a piece of land overlooking the Whirlpool on the Canadian side of [the] Niagara River for a birthday present" (7). Cruikshank and her husband spend every possible moment during the summer of 1904 on their land, clearing it, camping out in a tent, building a barn, and planning their dream house. Ultimately they move to Ottawa, so the book ends with

Cruikshank's admission that "the Dream House will always be a dream . . . . there will never be a home with the beautiful view of rapids and whirlpool from the windows" (257). During her foray into *Whirlpool Heights: The Dream-House on the Niagara River*, Urquhart could not have missed Julia Cruikshank's comment about the power of Pompilia's story, a power that resonated in her mind for a while: "I take back what I said about *The Ring and the Book* not moving me. I am reading "Pompilia" and any one who is not moved by that has no liking for poetry or beauty" (154). Filled with Cruikshank's observations about her surroundings, her marriage, the institution of marriage itself, and the responses she has to the many books she reads during her quiet hours at Whirlpool Heights, this diary shows that Cruikshank views her reading with clarity and passion, as an activity that not only occupies her leisure time, but also stimulates her thoughts about the world she occupies: books, she says, "are not written for the young or for the old, but for those who think" (17).

The contents of Cruikshank's diary are strikingly similar to those in Fleda's diary in *The Whirlpool*. The writers Fleda reads – Browning, Patmore, Swinburne – are prominent in Cruikshank's text, along with many others, such as Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle, and Oscar Wilde, to name but a few: the Julia Cruikshank of these pages is a very well-read woman. Perhaps inspired by Cruikshank's reading energies, Urquhart characterizes Robert Browning in a Eurocentric frame that introduces and concludes *The Whirpool*'s action, a frame that exemplifies the androcentric foundations of canonical writing in the long tradition of English literature. Recalling how he "detested" Tennyson's reflections on the death moment in his 1889 poem, "Crossing the Bar" (10), Urquhart's Browning is relieved that, at this late point of his life, unlike Tennyson, he has already written his death poem, and decides not to write another one. He lapses instead into a conflicted reminiscence about Percy Bysshe Shelley's life and violent death by drowning. In this way, Urquhart links the long line of famed male Victorian poets to one another and points to the privilege of access they inherit from those who wrote and published before them.

Poetics are not the only Victorian influence in *The Whirlpool.* The novel's opening sentence, in which employees at a specialized fabric mill in England "wove secret cloth on secret looms in secret factories" (21), establishes the pattern that links contemporary readers of this female-authored story to the nineteenth-century characterizations of womanhood that formed the foundations for their social conditioning. Fleda McDougal, the novel's fictional woman reader of male-authored texts who sees her own struggles to fit herself into imbalanced gendered legacies reflected in those texts, is readily available to *The Whirlpool's* readers because of the intimate musings she records:

> Every day when David leaves, either for the camp or for the rooms in town, I go down to the whirlpool.
>
> All by myself at the water's edge I make small boats out of folded birch bark and then I push them out into the current.
>
> This takes most of the morning.
>
> Little white vessels departing from the shore, set adrift on a long tour of the whirlpool. Like people, just like people. A complete revolution would be a long, long life. Not many are able to go the distance. Those that do I am unsure of. Have they moved around the full circumference or

> have they doubled back somehow on an unknown current? Have they been affected by the wind? (59-60)

Fleda likens her little boats to people, people whose lives take them on arduous journeys whether long or short. She takes to naming her little vessels. Intriguingly named, the four boats sail with the words "Angel," "Dreamhouse," "Warrior," and "Adonais" emblazoned on their paper hulls. When Fleda puts her four small paper boats to sail off into the swirling river, only three return: the boat Fleda calls "Angel" never comes back. Fleda realizes later that not only had the "Angel" boat gone astray, but also that "she had completely failed to notice it" (61). What she does notice is that, going the distance is an unusual, and for Fleda, suspicious feat. She questions whether they have taken an easier route, accepting and conforming to the buffets of social winds and currents, whereas those whose journeys are shorter have chosen the difficult path of squaring off against social expectations and daring to challenge the whirlpool's destiny, a destiny determined by patterns of the past.

During the waning years of the nineteenth century, widespread controversy swept through Britain with vehement, entrenched positions carved out on both sides of 'The Woman Question. In her introduction to *Criminals, Idiots, Women, & Minors,* Susan Hamilton describes this controversy as an uproar about woman's role in society that "was recognized at the time as one of the key political debates of the century" (9), an uproar in which feminist voices were "routinely ridiculed, frequently attacked, silenced or given only minimal coverage" in the influential mainstream presses of the day (9). By situating *The Whirlpool*'s narrative in this time period, Urquhart engages in an intertextual investigation, a vital activity of feminist literary theory that, according to Graham Allen's consensus in *Intertextuality*, "connects women's writing across periods and national divisions . . . build[ing] something as cohesive and as intertextually rich as the traditionally sanctioned male literary canon" (145). *The Whirlpool*'s two female characters attempt to find their autonomous identities in a newly-minted country heavily influenced by old world values. Fleda McDougal and Maud Grady take different approaches to making meaningful lives for themselves in the wild Niagara landscape that, although Canada's youthful exuberance and expanse brings some freedom of distance, is nevertheless subject to European social conventions and restrictive British laws which stipulated that "women could not vote, could not own property if married, and were denied access to the kinds of education and occupations available to men" (Hamilton 9). Specifically, in *The Whirlpool,* Urquhart reaches across the decades to link contemporary Canadian fiction with its root Victorian values symbolically represented by the literary works Urquhart places at the disposal of her characters, works that were the very ones, or of the same era, that the first feminist literary theorists examined for representational portrayals of conventional female behaviour.

Urquhart's novel demonstrates the impact that traditional versions of marriage and womanhood still have on contemporary life. Ultimately, Fleda, rather than taking either of the expected routes for Victorian heroines—death or idealized wife—unpredictably makes an abrupt exit from the story. When she walks away from the whirlpool, her half-built house, her husband, and – at this point sporting short hair and trousers rather than her long womanly tresses and dresses – the social limitations placed on her gender, the impetus for the unusual action Fleda takes is found in the novel's intertexts. Fleda's exit is where *The Whirlpool* departs from Cruikshank's *Whirlpool*

Heights: The Dream-House on the Niagara River. Whereas Cruikshank departs her freshly-built barn by the whirlpool to follow her husband to his new posting in Ottawa, Fleda refuses to let her life be defined by the patriarchal parameters set down for her by historical tradition, her husband, or her beloved books. In this way, Urquhart's first novel revises images of the passive wife, the woman reader and the woman writer who look for themselves in the cultural texts all around them, find the representations lacking, and subvert the assumptions they contain through their life choices.

Critically considered a somewhat pale re-write of Emily Bronte's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*, Urquhart's second novel, *Changing Heaven* (1990), illustrates how feminist literary criticism moved from examining representations of women in literary works written by men to texts written by women. By grounding this work in Bronte's canonical nineteenth-century text, Urquhart adds not only to its narrative lore but also to the vast body of critical interpretation of *Wuthering Heights*. As J. Russell Perkin notes, Urquhart's version does not do well under the considerable shadow or "ghost of her strong precursor" (116), but nevertheless offers a contemporary telling of an "archetypal romance plot in which women exist for the sake of love, their destinies handed over to the hero of the story" (117).[6] Indeed, Urquhart must take her troubled protagonist to Bronte's moors where she meets a suitably kind hero who finishes the narration of her story.

Existing critical evaluation of *Changing Heaven* is diverse but consistently includes references to its overt intertextuality. By comparison, the critical attention *Wuthering Heights* has received is not only widely diverse, but also overwhelming in sheer volume. Nevertheless, as Linda Peterson observes in her introduction to a recent edition of Bronte's novel, whether analyzed as an ageless romance or a work that is "vitally historical, responding to pressing social, political, and economic issues of the mid-nineteenth century" (11), all commentary about Bronte's novel acknowledges its strange innate power to move virtually any reader. Indeed, if the persistence with which the novel stays with its readers, as Urquhart herself acknowledges, has become one of its most well-known attributes, the multiple critical perspectives applied to the novel have only added to *Wuthering Heights*' lasting mystique.

---

[6] Perkins also notes that Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* is "only the latest of more than a century of attempts to master *Wuthering Heights*" (119).

As with the entire body of *Wuthering Heights'* criticism, specifically feminist approaches to Bronte's novel also come from a range of particularly diverse perspectives: Peterson comments that "a long tradition of feminism contributes to modern interpretations of *Wuthering Heights*" (345), and Patsy Stoneman contends that "it took a long time for *Wuthering Heights* to be read as a positive text for women" (*Wuthering Heights* 155). Stoneman provides a survey of excerpts from published feminist critiques that not only point to the interest the novel has generated among twentieth-century feminist theorists, but also demonstrate the "eclectic nature of much feminist criticism" (158). The excerpts Stoneman includes in her survey range from commenting on *Wuthering Heights* as a demonstration of "women's psychological development" (156), "a refusal of [Catherine and Heathcliff's] proper sexual roles" (156), "a materialist perspective [that] plac[es] the question of individual choice in the context of economic and social possibilities" (162), and the "explosion of feminist studies" (165) that occurred in the 1980s. Stoneman also notes Margaret Homans' conclusion that "mothers are doomed by gender-polarisation to reproduce daughters who will in their turn serve the needs of patriarchal capitalism" (167). Indeed, this comment accurately reflects what happens in the mother-daughter relationship between *Changing Heaven*'s protagonist Anne Frear and her mother.

As this array of critical methodology indicates, Urquhart's selection of *Wuthering Heights* as the primary intertext for her second novel not only brings a powerful, enduring work of female-authored fiction into her narrative, but also, by association, suggests that the multiple feminist critical responses that have added to the lasting impact of Bronte's novel will enrich evaluations of *Changing Heaven*. However, while the two novels have overt similarities, as noted, Urquhart's work here suffers by the comparison. *Wuthering Heights* is an uneasy read, a narrative melee of human and non-human conflict in which all worldly elements seem to clash at all times; unsurprisingly, *Changing Heaven* is also an uneasy narrative, in which unrelenting clashes between the characters, their worlds, and their obsessions cloud their narrative and thematic effectiveness. Moreover, while *Wuthering Heights*' uneasiness settles into the literary consciousness for the long term, *Changing Heaven's* uneasiness dissipates too easily into the literary ether.

Changing Heaven begins with a two-page "Prologue," essentially a short list of demands attributed to an anonymous "she." Although her identity is not firmly established, references to "the Great Lake" and "the villagers" narrow the choices down to either Emily Bronte's ghost or the novel's contemporary protagonist, Ann Frear. Later in the novel, Ann refers to the book she is writing about the weather, suggesting that she is indeed the subject of the prologue. Still, the anonymous "she" who begins the novel could be a composite of both characters; "she" is at once an omniscient narrator and Urquhart herself, a blended symbolic voice that speaks to the continuing effect and affect of the past on the present. Her demands are diverse, but always connected to change and disturbance:

> She wants to write a book about the wind, about the weather. She wants the words *constancy* and *capriciousness* to move in and out of the sentences . . . . She wants to predict time in relation to change and to have all her predictions prove wrong. . . . She wants the again and again of that revenant, the wind – its evasiveness, its tenacity, its everlastingness. . . . She wants to write a book about disturbance; about elements that change shape but never substance, about things that never disappear. About restlessness. (1-2)

Attributed to this collective "she," these "wants" indicate an urgency, perhaps a need to demonstrate how that which is deemed constant is inconstant, that which is understood as predictable is unpredictable, that which appears to be the product of progress is, in its new shape, unprogressive, but substantially connected to that which "never disappear[s]." In this way, *Changing Heaven*'s "Prologue" eloquently and poetically expresses a fundamental feminist perspective that enduring social change only comes through conscientious disturbances that parallel the meteorological, a perspective definitively prevalent in *Changing Heaven's* perplexing underlayers.

The clashes between classes and genders, between insider and outsider, and between emotion and reason that pervade *Wuthering Heights* also permeate *Changing Heaven*. In a gesture towards the strong impact that past roots have on present institutional structures, Urquhart takes her two contemporary *Changing Heaven* characters on journeys from their Toronto area homes to the international geography of

Canada's historical parentage: England and Europe. The travelers in this narrative are Bronte scholar, Ann Frear, and art historian, Arthur Woodruff; their storyline imitates Bronte's tale of Catherine Earnshaw's passion for the wild orphan Heathcliff and Heathcliff's relentless obsession for Catherine. The disturbing love affair between Ann and Arthur is perhaps the least engaging part of *Changing Heaven*'s narrative; nevertheless, Ann's problematic relationship with Arthur draws attention to the relentless durability of the passive conditioning that is part of womanhood in twentieth century western society.

Anticipating the cold contained Austin Fraser Urquhart will create as *The Underpainter*'s protagonist a few years later, *Changing Heaven*'s Arthur Woodruff keeps Ann outside of his life because "he does not want to be known – at least by her – does not wish to submit to her scrutiny" (104). As for Ann, her almost passive willingness to submit to Arthur's degrading treatment of her stands in stark contrast to Bronte's passionate, defiant Catherine Earnshaw. The young Catherine is a powerful female presence whose spirited female strength exists in a hostile physical and social environment. That Urquhart's Ann Frear is missing much of Catherine's rebellious spirit is especially evident when she embarks on the "long voyage to the rented room[s]" (77) she briefly shares with Arthur. Instead of resisting Arthut's callous indifference, Ann retreats into her memories of being a young girl traveling a long, hard road, a road she already connects to "the sad heart of Wuthering Heights [sic]" (79). Although Bronte's novel burst indelibly into this young Canadian girl's childhood, it nevertheless left the adult Ann with the feeling that "it was as though her life was being lived [. . .] inside the great, dark, rattling cages of nineteenth-century fiction" (79).

The "cage of nineteenth-century fiction" that so influences Ann's choices offers its own evidence about women creatively finding ways to add their voices to literary works; Bronte's Catherine Earnshaw is no exception to this creative subversion. Catherine's boldness is evident when Lockwood, lodged in Catherine's room, begins to go through her books and discovers that she was an indiscriminate diarist, writing her story in the margins and white spaces of all her books, "covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left" (Peterson 38). As Lynn Pykett notes, the scattered palimpsest that is the diary Catherine left behind is "a text of discontent and rebellion, recording and speaking out against the domestic tyranny of Hindley, and the religious tyranny of Joseph" (468). Indeed, a good part of *Wuthering Heights'* enduring legacy is due to the mercurial young Catherine Earnshaw's presence, a presence that "dramatizes the limits of female influence" in that the "spirited and rebellious Catherine must ultimately submit to the legal control of her father, her brother, and subsequently her husband" (Pykett 472).

Completely different from Catherine's rebellion, *Changing Heaven's* contemporary protagonist, Ann, seems to walk robotically through her life, as if her affair with Arthur has mesmerized her into mute assent: "stunned" and "staggering" (97) through this affair, Ann displays symptoms of an autonomous paralysis. An otherwise astute analyst, she cannot extricate herself from a punishing romantic experience. Ann's passivity while in the throes of this obsession stands in stark contrast to the young Catherine Earnshaw's spirited defiance of Hindley and Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*. But, as she grows to adulthood, Catherine transforms from a wild girl-child into the socially compliant young woman who becomes Catherine Linton. This conversion demonstrates the effect of cultural conditioning on young women, or, as Pykett observes, how "the particular version of femininity involved in the ideal of female gentility is socially produced and reinforced, rather than derived from women's 'nature'" (470).

While the comparison between Urquhart's Ann Frear and Bronte's Catherine Earnshaw situates Ann as a paler, less satisfying imitation of Catherine, the two characters signify the continued passive conditioning that has monitored the transition of girls into women in western society bred in the over one hundred and fifty years that elapsed between the first publication of *Wuthering Heights* and the appearance of *Changing Heaven*. This period of time encompasses much history in both feminism and feminist literary criticism. Because of the sustained efforts of nineteenth-century feminists battling unjust British laws, first-wave feminists fighting for voting rights in Britain and North America, writers revealing further imbalances such as libraries that refuse women entry (Woolf 6-7), second-wave feminists struggling to achieve social equity, and ultimately the academic genesis of feminist literary criticism as a discipline, central issues in women's rights have come a long way.

Raising awareness about the impact of gendered cultural conditioning has resulted in a wider realization that women must find relief from having to passively accept a traditionally endorsed version of womanhood in order to find acceptable social fulfillment. All these elements factor into *Changing Heaven's* portrayal of a contemporary young woman who works strongly and independently to gain a place for herself in the scholarly world, yet who simultaneously struggles to separate herself from the conditioning of a childhood. This conditioning is the very system that young Catherine Earnshaw rebels against when she inscribes the passionately chaotic marginalia that represents a need to write over that which is already written. Although Ann's rebellion, if her affair with the married, cruel Arthur can be seen as a rebellion, does not compare well with the willfulness Bronte's memorable young Catherine Earnshaw demonstrates, this analogy is one of the strengths of Urquhart's novel in that the chaos into which Ann's life is thrown by her involvement with Arthur demonstrates the difficulty women have in overthrowing hundreds of years of "appropriate" feminine conditioning.

Just as Catherine dominates Heathcliff in death, Arthur dominates Ann in life. This domination lasts until she shakes her belief in the impossible romantic visions she developed when, as a child, she brought her visions of *Wuthering Heights* to life with her dollhouse. In an indirect intertext invoking Henrik Ibsen's groundbreaking play, *A Doll's House* (1879), Urquhart connects Ann to a character she can never meet, the balloonist Arianna Ether who, in death, joins Emily Bronte's ghost, haunting the Yorkshire moors where they both met their destinies. As they discover each other's stories, Emily listens to Arianna recount her memory of a childhood dollhouse, similar to the one that Ann plays with as a child. These doll houses are highly symbolic, invoking Ibsen's still performed work, and, although Ibsen has a "vexed" (Finney 89) relationship to feminism,[7] *A Doll's House* did create a gendered furor with the first presentation of Nora Helmer's shocking (for the times) door slam as she walks out on her family at the end of the play in order to find her own adult autonomy. Claimed by early feminists as a champion for women's causes, Ibsen provoked mixed responses; nevertheless, his work stands as an important moment for late nineteenth-century feminist causes and "powerfully advocates women's right to choose their destiny and combine roles as they desire" (Finney 103).

---

[7] Gail Finney presents two views of Ibsen's relationship to feminism: the first situates Ibsen as a "quasi-socialist" and the second as a humanist (89). Working through many of his plays in her argument, Finney does not really define him as either; she does, however, conclude that "Ibsen's oeuvre allies him with feminist thinkers not only of his era but of our own day as well" (103).

The dollhouses both Ann and Arianna describe in *Changing Heaven* are fraught with implications. Ann's childhood toy is located in the basement near the furnace—"that large beast with its boiler"—and is "an apparatus perfectly designed for shrinking the world of the novel into the territory of seven small furnished rooms" (20). While imagining the house she and her controlling lover Jeremy might live in, Arianna drifts back to the memory of a childhood dollhouse she had—a fragile, faulty construction "with the back missing and the other side not quite real despite its lovely little windows with shutters and its front door with a tiny knocker" (51). Like the house that Ibsen's Nora leaves, both dollhouses represent the faulty structures into which little girls are born, the pretty façade of femininity that hides the missing pieces of the reality that will shape their lives: the longstanding, historically, and institutionally reinforced betrayal, a betrayal supported by venerable social structures – the very structures that Bronte depicts as relentless wind and weather battering the moors.

Changing Heaven addresses the complex transhistorical social structures that contain western women, and examines the impact those structures have on the contemporary female "landscape." As in *The Whirlpool*, *Changing Heaven's* narrative subtext demonstrates how patriarchal power has been historically and traditionally preserved. *Wuthering Heights* is so deeply foundational to *Changing Heaven*'s contemporary story that unraveling it from the parallel narrative is at once revealing and confusing. Urquhart admits that she chose Emily Bronte "partly because of [her] great admiration for her work" (Canton 196). However, given that the complexity of the Bronte novel allows for evaluation based on numerous critical approaches – whether Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, or a combination of all three – reading *Changing Heaven* in light of the vast amount of critical work available on Bronte is a task that offers an almost infinite range of possibilities and directions. *Changing Heaven* also marks a turning point in Urquhart's development as a writer.

In her third novel, *Away*, Urquhart's narrative approach changes in that the overt intertextual elements she uses to initiate feminist inquiry are largely absent, instead situating its female protagonist in the key position of storyteller. Urquhart uses the notion of being "away" as being trapped in a particular place that has no physical location, a consequence of who rather than where. Because *Away* depicts one mother who abandons her family to live near a mystical lake and another who relinquishes her daughter to be raised by her brother and sister-in-law, an important part of *Away*'s commentary on motherhood deals with the social consequences for mothers who abandon their children, consequences that bring to both mothers and their families legacies of secrets. In *Away*, the "awayness" of motherhood profoundly affects generation after generation in one family. *Away* shows the need for mothers and women to be the authors of their own stories. The storyteller, Esther O'Malley Robertson is from the current generation of a family whose women "leaned towards extremes" (3). The ambiguity of this statement permeates the novel, and is long-reaching both temporally and domestically:

> the women of this family have been known to believe that the house has *become* the storm; that some ancient quarrel is going on between that which is built and that which is untouched, and that the house might fling itself in a moment of anguish into the

> arms of its monstrous liquid neighbour. (5)

The house is not only where these women live, but also the parameters of how they live: it stands for the limitations of the way those parameters are built into the very structure of both house and community, a structure that continues to fuel an "ancient quarrel" that denigrates one half of the population for the benefit of the other half. Land and sea are monstrous to each other, but unable to separate themselves from "that which is built" and that which comes into its realm untouched but never leaves the same way.

Urquhart's obsession with the narratives of landscape and history never leave her fiction, but expand as she moves from *Away* to her next novel where she focuses on the production of visual art. The artistic intertexts Urquhart includes in *The Underpainter* demonstrate American modern art's representations of masculine and feminine ideals, such as those represented in Robert Henri's traditional, realist paintings. As well, Urquhart includes references to Rockwell Kent's stylized abstract paintings, works that reflect either the stark beauty of the Canadian north or huge Beowulf-like males attached to the sides of mountains, one depicted in the process of throwing a severed arm to an unseen recipient. In a cameo role, Urquhart includes the eccentric American artist Abbott Thayer and his meticulous renderings of angels, both fallen and otherwise. Austin, the fictional artist-protagonist, attends the actual historical New York Art Student's League, a studio run by Robert Henri. Through Austin, Urquhart depicts the reduction of these models to almost still-life status in the following passage:

> At this time, my only knowledge of the female form had come from Robert Henri's life class: shop girls and aspiring actresses posing for extra cash. They had never seemed quite real to me, though sometimes at night

> they walked into my dreams in the most intimate of ways. Robert H. had told us it was the artist's response to the subject, not the subject itself, that was important. He rarely spoke to the girls except to tell them when to break the gesture he had prescribed. I had seen more than one young woman begin to tremble and grow pale under the effort of holding a twisted, difficult pose for more than half an hour when our teacher had forgotten to allow her to rest. (73-74)

From his own recollections, Urquhart establishes Austin's inability to engage fully and intimately with his most important subject and muse, Sara Pengelly. The novel attributes this barrier to an art-world mandate that woman is an object of art, not a participant or executor of artistic endeavour.

After *The Underpainter*, Urquhart remained interested in including works of art in her novels. Fascinated by an account of sculptor Walter Allward's difficulties associated with the construction of the Vimy Ridge Monument and his commitment to the completion of the striking memorial to those Canadian soldiers whose lives and remains were lost in World War I, she crafted a story that vividly brings into readerly consciousness the impact of war not only on the soldiers who were in the trenches and on the battlefields, but also on the women behind the scenes, both in the hospitals at the front and waiting back home. Klara Becker's quest to carve her dead lover's face onto the Vimy Ridge Monument is the main thrust of the second half of Urquhart's fifth novel, *The Stone Carvers*. The monument gradually takes on its completed form, when the single-minded driving force that Allward exhibits while steering his masterpiece to its completion collides dramatically with Klara's pilgrimage to the monument's construction site, disguised as a man so that her femaleness will not exclude her from being allowed to contribute to its making. But her work is too original, too personal. It catches Allward's attention, forcing a confrontation that ultimately results in the moment high on the studio scaffold that is secured to the side of the towering structure when Allward sees through Klara's disguise, not necessarily because of her appearance, but because she speaks in her woman's voice.

Viewed from a feminist perspective, the visual art works that appear in Urquhart's novels also reflect on women's subordination in patriarchal cultures, a reflection that comes from within the ideologies of those cultures. Patriarchal ideologies pose great difficulty for women artists who work from within them. Sadly notable among reviews of *The Stone Carvers* is a vehement critique of the novel by Robert Sibley who denounces Urquhart's ability to have any insight whatsoever into the traumas war entails simply because she is female. Recalling his own visit to the Douai plain near Vimy, France, Sibley says he "approached" Urquhart's fifth novel with curiosity as to how she would handle the emotions of war, and reaches the conclusion that *The Stone Carvers* is "a ludicrously sentimental and emotionally overloaded piece of fiction, one of those claustrophobic "Canadian" novels where the hypersensitive heroine struggles to express the longing for completion embedded in her soul" (58). Not only is Sibley's disdain for a woman who dares to write about the masculine domain of war barely concealed, but he also contradicts himself, in that he has just established the immensity of the emotions of war by stating that "war is something you do not forget" (58). Further into his review, Sibley reveals another reason for his indignation: on the part of the story that involves a healing relationship between two men, Sibley makes the following observation:

> I noticed nothing that fore-shadowed the revelation of Tilman's homosexuality, and my sense was that I had been snookered by a bit of politically correct, ever-so-fashionable plot-twisting and not by well-planned revelation. (59)

Attacking Urquhart's skills as a novelist backfires on Sibley and raises questions as to whether he actually could read the novel through his preconceived notions. Contrary to Sibley's claim, Tilman's homosexuality is no surprise because he has formed all of his important relationships with other men in the novel and spent his life running away from the women in his life. Sibley's review is filled with paternalistic, condescending references to what he calls "feminist pretention" and "sentimental psychology": indeed it is an exaggerated example of the treatment that many works female novelists receive from male reviewers, a topic I will expand on, with Margaret Laurence's help, in the third chapter of this dissertation. Revealing the roots of patriarchal historicity to contemporary readers, even in subtle intertexts that require active reader participation, highlights the necessity for the two major twentieth-century feminist movements. Moreover, in the early twenty-first century, a time when the continued relevancy of feminism is being questioned, these revelations become significantly more relevant.

* * *

Reading Urquhart's early novels for their feminist subtexts also reveals their critical commentary about the continuing impact of patriarchally-determined views of motherhood and mothering on women's lives. Urquhart's novels present a decidedly pessimistic view of motherhood, and representations of "feminist mothering," that is, as Andrea O'Reilly says, "mothering, freed from the institution of motherhood . . . [and] experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change" (*Mother Outlaws* 2), are largely absent. With the one exception being *The Whirlpool*'s Maud Grady, mothers in Urquhart's novels are usually dead, missing, relegated to the background, alienated from society or suffering severe psychological distress. Despite this noticeable aspect of Urquhart's oeuvre, the subject of motherhood rarely appears in critical analysis of her work; indeed, very little critical analysis of Urquhart's work is even feminist in perspective. In their introduction to *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy refer to this type of critical gap as "feminist avoidance of the maternal," observing that "few fictional or theoretical works *begin* with the mother in her own right . . . and those that do seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective" (2-3). Feminist critics may avoid Urquhart's work because it is so overtly white and middle-class or because much of its feminist content lies in its intertextual subtexts. Urquhart's first novel, *The Whirlpool*, does feature a mother "in her own right" and sustains that focus throughout, and although it could hardly be deemed an overt feminist representation, Maud's story offers an important feminist subtext, as outlined below in my analysis of her metamorphosis from obedient wife to self-sustaining widow. In Urquhart's novels, the maternal characters and their perspectives are usually quietly present in each narrative and reading their narrative function contributes significantly to their overall thematic vitality.

One of the most important ways in which western society classifies adult women is by whether or not they are mothers. Moreover, mothers themselves are categorized in the broadly terrifying groups as "good" or "bad" mothers. These groups determine where a mother fits in relation to motherhood: "in patriarchal culture, women who mother in the institution of motherhood are regarded as 'good' mothers, while women who mother outside or against the institution of motherhood are 'bad' mothers" (O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws*, 2). For Urquhart, mothering means motherhood. Not becoming a mother, or failing in executing that experience according to the parameters of patriarchal motherhood means trouble for an Urquhart female character.

In all her novels, Urquhart depicts those characters who are not appropriate mothers as sidelined or exiled from active life, trapped in servile positions, or simply not present. The character who most significantly defies this pattern, Fleda McDougal of *The Whirlpool*, simply vanishes from her life, exiting without an explanatory word or indication of where she will go, suggesting that women who choose not to become mothers must leave the central social arena. However, those women who do become mothers, according to Urquhart's novels, must be prepared for isolation and angst no matter how they engage with and conduct themselves as mothers. Aberrations from expected maternal behaviour are punished, again by exile or death and, even those characters who engage in what outwardly appears as acceptable motherhood struggle with the constraints this idealized role places on them: Maud Grady, struggles in her relationship with her young autistic son, a strained bond plagued by disrupted connections. More intriguingly, those mothers who conform to motherhood's stipulations, such as Ann Frear's mother in *Changing Heaven*, become grotesque, unsympathetic characters who simply fade away having left indelible damages on their offspring.

Each subsequent novel offers a different, yet similar, version of patriarchal motherhood and its consequences. In Urquhart's second novel, *Changing Heaven*, the ghostly Arianna Ether refers to her mother as "the absent flower" (71) who disappeared into an enchanted land far from the dreary reality of Arianna's colourless childhood in late Victorian London. The third novel, *Away*, depicts one mother who abandons her family to live near a mystical lake and another who relinquishes her illegitimate daughter to be raised by her sister-in-law. In her fourth novel, *The Underpainter*, the male protagonist, Austin Fraser, remembers his young mother as a Gothic ghost drawn to spend her afternoons in a bleak graveyard before her early death from scarlet fever. Urquhart's first novel of the twenty-first century, *The Stone Carvers*, has a mother who chains her young son to a wall because she cannot tolerate his wanderlust. As well, a memorable cameo character of *The Stone Carvers*, Crazy Phoebe, takes to the streets following the death of her infant child, dressed as a homeless drifter in many layers of heavy clothing to hide her fertile female form. Finally, Urquhart's recently published sixth novel, *A Map of Glass*, offers the portrayal of a mother fully assimilated into the patriarchal ideology of her conditioning: Sylvia Bradley's mother passively accepts and even encourages the drab future her husband plans for their disaffected daughter.

Mourning and motherhood go together from the outset in Urquhart's work. At the beginning of *The Whirlpool*, widow Maud Grady is wrapped in the required nineteenth-century categorical form for women who have lost their husbands to death. The novel's opening exposition explains why Maud spends two years contained by the stiff black crepe of her mourning attire. Maud's mourning wear is so restrictive that it limits her movements and causes her to develop a "fear of weather" (22) because even the smallest amount of precipitation or perspiration bleeds black stains onto her skin. Moreover, this requisite uniform contains Maud in other ways: the "weepers" or black ribbons hanging from the "oppressive bonnet" restrict her movements, both physically and psychically, and the heavy veil dangerously impairs her vision, almost causing her to step unknowingly into the path of oncoming streetcars or carriages (28). As a widow, however, Maud does not succumb to fear or panic, but, with trepidation at first, takes over the funeral business. Breaking the angel model with surprising enterprise and grit, in spite of the obstacle of inexperience, Maud manages to keep the funeral home staff in her employ by convincing them that "she intended to survive and that…the business should continue as usual" (27). Soon she is comfortable handling the corporate challenges, managing the accounts, and holding "the pen as easily as a teaspoon in her hand" (28).

Maud does, however, suffer moments of alienation from the women of the area who make their feelings known through the loudly murmured comments that reach Maud's ears: " 'Looking for business,' the town matrons would whisper as they had the first, and last, time [Maud] attempted to visit an ailing friend" (114). With the inclusion of intricate, seemingly secondary, details such as these, Urquhart demonstrates how women are not only monitored by the men in their lives, but are also policed by socially-adherent women in their communities who punish through exclusion when they determine that one of their own has strayed from conventional notions of female behaviour. Despite her community's disapproval, Maud's inherited business becomes an avenue to autonomy for her, and her determined endeavour to survive on her own reveals the subtle workings of the social conflicts that surface when women of this time entered a predominantly male realm—business—even when that business is death.

The business of death is a family business for Maud in enlightening ways. Observing family rituals in her capacity as undertaker offers Maud moments of thought-provoking pause. Sam, the funeral home's embalmer, tells Maud the story of delivering a casket for a young tuberculosis victim, a young woman who had been engaged to be married. According to Sam, the girl's mother insisted that her dying daughter be married before her death, so the ceremony was performed at the girl's bedside with the wedding dress lying on top of the rapidly weakening bride (148). Death comes almost immediately, and the girl is buried, not only with her wedding dress on top of her, but also with her entire trousseau wardrobe, stuffed into the casket with her by her grieving mother. The vision of the young girl resting eternally under the weight of her wedding wardrobe is too much for Maud, who is distressed by the story and cannot stop thinking about it:

> Maud carried Sam's story around with her for the rest of the day, thinking about costumes. Lord, she thought, they are always dressing you up as something and then you are not yourself anymore. This young girl, the frozen, immobilized bride, coerced into it and then dead and unable ever to grow beyond it. No one now would even remember her name. Anecdotally, she would always be the bride, the one who was married and buried in the same breath. (149)

This troubling incident adds to Maud's determination to maintain an independent life. She recognizes that the deaths of her husband and his parents have allowed her to escape the limbo-like existence that was her married life: from Maud's new perspective she sees that marriage is itself a form of burial. In addition, Maud realizes that she must also escape another kind of internment, the mourning wardrobe that names her as widow: "Bride, wife, widow. She would not stop now" (149). The "frozen," "immobilized" bride echoes the "encased in form" angel of Patmore's poem and the "real Courtauld crape" (22) that Maud is forced to wear as designated widow, the stains leaving her skin looking gangrenous: all these visions are connected to each other by the notion of containment within patriarchal institutions, both literal and ideological.

Maud's struggle with motherhood wears on her as well. Faced with her situation as a widowed mother of a young autistic son in the restrictive late nineteenth-century, Maud despairs of the distinctly un-maternal feelings she has for her child:

> He was like an invisible wall she ran into daily, bruising herself with each contact, until the very knowledge of its existence brought her only a memory of pain. And anger in the presence of pain.
>
> Suddenly this anger spilled out of Maud's heart and into her body, adrenalin rushing like fire through her veins. Turning around with one whirling gesture, she grabbed the child by the hair. Now they were facing directly into the sun and Maud became blinded, both by its strength and the strength of her own emotion. (66)

Maud's child remains nameless throughout the entire novel, referred to only as "he" or "the child," as if he is representative of either that long lost state of childhood every human being once occupied and cannot recapture or of a seer-like mystical figure whose purpose is to disrupt the indisputable. For Maud, the child disrupts her unexamined understanding of what motherhood is, and dispels the notion that her presence alone in his life should cure his ills, should spur him to normal communication. Also, Maud discovers that her status as a mother does not render her immune to feelings of anger and frustration, feelings that are not consistent with patriarchal ideals of good mothering. The child, to Maud, at this point, is an 'it' that brings her to the point of painful anger, a point that carries her to allow her frustrations to vent in an almost-violent act of grabbing and forcing the child and herself towards a life-giving sun, that maybe, just maybe, some form of communication will result. And it does. Maud shouts the word 'sun' into her little boy's ear with same violence as she grabs his hair. Finally, with a shudder that racks his small body, the boy's inner barriers collapse and he groans out a response, a pain-racked, almost inhuman, vocalization of 'sun': "s-a-a-a-w-n," repeated by the little boy several times (67). Only then does Maud return to the gentle, expected form of mothering and release her child from the sun's blinding glare. In this startling passage, Urquhart demonstrates that mothering is filled with hotspots that invoke unpredictable reactions and results and that are inconsistent with conventional notions of what makes a good mother. In my capacity as a first-year university English teacher, I have included *The Whirlpool* on my syllabus several times. Inevitably, my students react to Maud as a neglectful "bad" mother, someone they cannot reconcile with their views of how a "good" mother would handle a difficult child. To my dismay, in my twenty-first century classroom, our discussions about *The Whirlpool* seldom dislodge my students' deeply ingrained views of what motherhood should look like.

While Maud struggles with her business and her child, Fleda McDougal resists her husband David's desire that she participate in his Laura Secord fetish one moment and be the epitome of angelic wifehood the next. However, Fleda's conflict is not only with David, but also with her would-be neighbours. The local mavens who criticize Maud for visiting the sick out of business motives rather than charitable ones do not neglect to consider Fleda's strange behaviour. As they do with Maud's unusual entrepreneurial situation, the town's matrons cannot let Fleda's unwifely behaviour go unnoticed, primly commenting to their mates that "[Fleda] should be having babies and minding the house" (71), instead of camping out in the woods.

Although *The Whirlpool*'s narrative is set totally in the year 1889, Urquhart's subsequent novels follow a pattern in which a contemporary story is intertwined with or runs parallel to a narrative from the past. In this way, Urquhart brings the past and all its buried influences into the present, exposing the roots of contemporary institutions such as marriage, motherhood, heterosexuality as socially established and dispelling the normative myths that surround them. While Ann Frear's mother is a present figure in *Changing Heaven* (1990), in the parallel Victorian story, absent mothers are prominent. Emily Bronte's ghost comments that

> Mama died . . . and Papa never mentioned her. Someone . . . told me that he cut the arms off her best silk dress. I imagined her armless then. A woman without arms: one who could not sew or draw or write or cook or hold me. I imagined that she died from severed arms. (129)

In other words, for Emily Bronte's ghost, in death, her mother was no longer one, no longer capable of doing the basic things that mothers are supposed to do and thus, having no other purpose, erased from current conversation and not spoken of again. Obviously, however, the memory of a mother who once had arms lingers much longer than forbidden conversations would indicate, lingers even as the un-held child grows from child to woman to ghost. Urquhart's choice of *Wuthering Heights'* creator as a narrative character is somewhat ironic in that Emily Bronte, who never became a mother in her life, is often used as an example of a woman who chose creativity over the more traveled female path of domesticity.

Mother memories are similar, yet different for Emily Bronte's ghostly companion who refers to her mother as "the absent flower" (71): "Mama died . . . coughing in the morning. . . . they carried her away. Papa returned with a bottle" (129). This elegiac memory of an absent mother carried away by death and a present father disappearing into an alcoholic stupor, stays with the young Polly White as she transforms into doomed balloonist Arianna Ether, the "apotheosis" of the "very spirit of British womanhood," a transformation engineered by her lover Jeremy Jacobs. Jeremy's version of British womanhood is right out of Coventry Patmore:

> Who are these women who help us, after all, if not angels? Should they not be given the power to fly like other angels? And if this is impossible for all, should not there be one who can represent the rest?
>
> Arianna Ether has chosen to perform this task, to ascend like an angel to heaven and then, with the aid of this wonder of modern invention, the parachute, to float, sylph-like, back to earth again in order to demonstrate the absolute purity, the *lightness* of the cleansed female soul. (26)

Urquhart's ironic tone is unmistakable here, as she creates the opposite of an apotheosis. Unbeknownst to Arianna, Jeremy has disabled her parachute and she will not "float, sylph-like, back to earth" from her balloon, but instead plummet to her death on the very moors that Emily Bronte and her unforgettable creation, Catherine Earnshaw, wandered. These two passages show how Urquhart represents both motherhood and womanhood as esteemed patriarchal institutions stripped of agency and elevated through contrived sentiments. Their apotheosis is a living death for those who must live within the confines of those institutions.

In the contemporary narrative that runs parallel to the Emily Bronte/Arianna Ether ghost story in *Changing Heaven*, Urquhart depicts the impact of Victorian womanhood/motherhood on contemporary Canadian mothers and daughters. Ann Frear's mother raises her daughter with a fear-based, dismissive kind of mothering that is distinctly aware of the future her maternal training will bring for her daughter. In her youth, Ann Frear is caught between an absent father and a stoic mother, a resigned figure of resentment who forces her daughter to go to a dance because she has "to start this nonsense sooner or later" (69). Wearing this resigned resentment like a proper Sunday dress, Ann's mother is a murky maternal character who uneasily sentences her daughter to continue the traditional social cycle: mothers train daughters to perpetuate a system that works against their best interests. As a child, Ann rides in her mother's car, asking questions about the world she sees around her. The following conversation occurs in downtown Toronto:

> "Mummy, where do those old men live . . . the ones down here with the groceries?"
>
> "Were they sitting on benches in the park?" [. . .]
>
> "No, Mummy, they were walking with groceries and old ladies do too."

> "If they are not sitting on benches at the park then they do not live at the Scott Mission. If they have groceries they live in a room with a hot plate." (29-30)

A hot plate becomes Ann's vision of the desolate end of life, "the fate of the thoroughly betrayed" (30), but no other explanation is ever forthcoming from her mother, and a series of similar, seemingly unremarkable conversations will shape Ann's own adult fears. Engaging in colourful, alien rituals is one of them. Traveling the overpasses and highways of southern Ontario, Ann spies what she sees as a colourful brass band: "Mummy, we have to stop and watch it!" she says. Ann's mother will have nothing to do with her daughter's enthusiasm and replies "this isn't the kind of road you can ever stop on" (46).

Suggestions of fear continue to mould Ann's transition from childhood to womanhood. Off to a church dance for the first time, Ann fears that she will not be asked to dance; her mother, however, has other fears for her daughter and thrusts a "pepper pot" into Ann's hand, telling her to stash it in her purse and use it if one of "them" tries "something" (68). This scene re-enacts images of nervous mid-twentieth-century mothers who anxiously warned their daughters against vague dangers from the opposite sex without actually saying what those dangers were or how to recognize them. Urquhart captures the very ambiguity of disillusioned motherhood: mothers who must conspire to induce their female offspring to accept a social order that has already betrayed them and requires them to betray their daughters for its continuance. Urquhart makes her ambiguous references last and work beyond the moment. After that evening, Ann, who did not dance but also had no need to use the pepper pot, asks her mother if she ever used it: " 'No,' replies her mother, 'unfortunately'" (69). In that terse response, Urquhart shows that with betrayal comes bitterness and resentment.

Away's family genealogy begins with Mary, who falls in love with an anonymous sailor who washes up on shore from a shipwreck and dies in Mary's arms. From that moment, Mary becomes Moira, and, although Urquhart says she did not know at the time that Moira means fate in Greek (Ferri 151), Mary/Moira's fate is determined. She is 'away,' stricken with abstraction and silence, a person her own mother does not recognize. For a time, Moira returns from her state of "awayness" after she marries Brian, a teacher who will ultimately move his wife and young son to Canada in the face of the Irish potato famine. In the Canadian southern Ontario wilds, Mary gives birth to a second child, Eileen, but is immediately drawn away to a nearby lake, Moira Lake. Seven years later, she returns, a corpse delivered by native Exodus Crow who tells her family where she has been for so long. Liam, her son, tries to re-write his mother's story as he pounds out his pain:

> Occasionally, in his mind, he made his mother fall awkwardly to the ground and push herself slowly to her feet, twisting her neck and looking back to the place where she had left her children. She was staggering along the dark ribbon of water that threaded itself through forests and swamps. At any point she might have paused . . . . She might have changed her mind and made this walk a return to him rather than a desertion, for until she reached the lake she would still have been his mother. (186)

For Liam, anything that draws his mother away from him causes her to stagger and twist; she falls repeatedly in his mind as she moves farther from him. The cause of her betrayal is an ominous force, "a dark ribbon" that knows no authority, an agential power that can "thread itself" through both wilderness and civilization.

Years later, Mary's daughter Eileen, also falls into a state of "awayness" herself after she unwittingly aids in the assassination of Darcy McGee, forever alienating her lover Aidan Lanighan from both her and their daughter. As Eileen makes the long trek back to patriarchal acceptance, she hears her mother's words:

> So this is what it is to be away, her mother's voice told her. You are never present where you stand. You see the polished dishes in your kitchen cupboard throwing back the hearth light, but they know neither you nor the meals you have taken from their surfaces. Your flagstones are a series of dark lakes that you scour, and the light that touches and alters them sends you unspeakable messages. Waves arch like mantles over everything that burns. Each corner is a secret and your history is a lie. (345)

A vast landscape of transgression hangs over Eileen's mystical experience with her mother's words: "unspeakable messages" and "dark lakes" must be scoured, waves burn, and secrets lurk in dark corners. A history that presents lies as truth descends upon Eileen at a moment when she is pregnant by a lover who did not share his whole truth with her and then angrily eschews her when her ignorance has disastrous results. Eileen returns to her brother's home, has her child, and then watches as Liam and his wife Molly raise her daughter, Deirdre, as their own. Deirdre never learns the truth, but her daughter, Esther, does, when Eileen herself shares it with the granddaughter:

> An old woman called Eileen saw something of herself in the puzzled eyes of a twelve-year old girl. She had been watching the child for some time, waiting for the light, the wind, the position of the clouds to suggest when she should speak, when she should tell the story. (348)

Asked by her granddaughter why she waited so long to tell the truth, Eileen replies that Deirdre's life was "clean" and that, unlike the other women in her family, "she did not lean towards extremes" (355). Deirdre goes through life calmly and conventionally: she grows up, she gets married, she has a child, and weathers life's challenges in predictable fashion. Esther, however, has both Eileen and Aidan in her, according to Eileen, and needs to understand the "extremes" that make up her history. It is that history Urquhart questions; in the final lines of the novel, the future is ominous: "Under the glare of artificial light the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder. The scream of the machinery intensifies" (356).

In her fourth novel, Urquhart returns to a gothic representation of motherhood, albeit briefly. Indeed, readers have to pay attention to even find a mother depicted in this novel, so quickly does the protagonist's young mother appear and die. *The Underpainter*'s Austin Fraser remembers his mother as a Gothic ghost drawn to spend her afternoons in a bleak graveyard before her early death from scarlet fever. *The Underpainter* is unusual in that it is Urquhart's only novel told in the first person; moreover, the narrator is an American male enjoying a moderately successful career a New York based artist. Thematically, *The Underpainter* deals with women as artistic subjects rendered always by the male gaze and hand, excluded from recognition in the production of art.

As far as feminist mothering goes, *The Underpainter* depicts a young mother possibly on her way to a feminist kind of mothering before she dies. Austin calls his mother "a gifted Gothic narrator" who was "drawn to the sublime in nature" and "particularly admired high vantage points" (18), and notes that she abhorred flat land which was, she said, "like a dull story; one where you were able to determine the middle and the end right at the beginning" (19). The references to the Gothic and the sublime bring the age of Romanticism to mind, and the "high vantage points" are certainly reminiscent of the period's emphasis on imagination, innovation, and the subjective experience of the individual.[8] However, in her introduction to *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne K. Mellor laments the limitation of Romantic studies to the six main male poets (Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth). Noting that women writers "produced at least half of the literature published in England between 1780 and 1830" (1), Mellor argues that

> women Romantic writers [such as Jane Austen, Joanna Baillie, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Dorothy Wordsworth to name a but a few from Mellor's list] tended to celebrate, not the achievements of the imagination nor the overflow of powerful feelings

---

[8] As with so many definitive periods and movements, Romantic writers wrote against that which went before them, the period of classicism and neoclassisim which privileged elevated language and realist ideals. Romanticism, while drawing on classical works, worked towards spontaneity and the expression of "natural" states in both the physical world and human nature, states uncorrupted by society's influence. *The Underpainter* is not the first instance in which Urquhart draws on the Romantic sublime. In *The Whirlpool*, Urquhart's characterization of Robert Browning on his calm civilized Venetian deathbed is obsessed with Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's turbulent, sublime, chaotic death by drowning in an Italian sea storm.

> [here alluding to William Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry [9]] but rather the workings of the rational mind, a mind relocation—in a gesture of revolutionary gender implications—in the female as well as the male body. They thus insisted upon the fundamental equality of women and men. (2-3)

Mellor's observation shows that periods and movements have differing impacts on gender because each gender experiences the conditions of her or his lived time period in different ways. In some ways, women's lived experience was the Gothic as compared to the male sublime, a gloomy, bleak, even grotesque decay of self in a male-dominant, even oblivious social order.

Austin's mother's imagination was to be her only outlet, other than her child. Married at sixteen to a man older and remote by nature, Austin's mother lived in a "claustrophobic world" (24); for the first nine years of his life, her son was her prime source of companionship: "I became her playmate; her sometimes unwilling playmate. By the age of nine I adored her and was perplexed by her; coveted and occasionally felt smothered by her company" (25). Spending a snowy day in a chilly graveyard becomes her death sentence. In death she lies in a flat cemetery with "neither marble statuary nor extreme geography to honour her brief life" (31). The artist Austin becomes associates his mother with a vivid red, a colour known as "alizarin crimson [. . .] a colour so unreliable it could practically be called fleeting, it disappears in less than thirty years [. . . .] it is impossible to keep" (31). Austin's mother approached motherhood like a child getting to know a new toy. She played with her son; she took him on questionable outings in questionable weather. Whether she was challenged by anyone is not known. All Austin remembers is a vibrant young woman, housebound, with no other stimulation than her child and her imagination. How she would have used this imagination to manage a longer life in her situation cannot be known, but her isolation kept her away from being judged on the basis of her performance within patriarchal motherhood parameters.

---

[9] In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth writes that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (253).

In her next novel, *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart returns to a female protagonist: Klara Becker is a spinster, "a mature woman in the early 1930s [who] was not averse to being called a spinster. She liked the sound of the word, the way it flung itself out of one's mouth and thrust itself, bristling, into the day. She was eccentric, as spinsters are meant to be . . ." (29). With this introduction, readers meet the grown-up Klara who has lost her parents to death, her brother to the road, and her lover to the Great War in Europe. She has also learned two artistic skills to the level of mastering them: tailoring, learned from her mother, and carving, from her grandfather, in her brother Tilman's absence: "Klara howled and stomped in the workshop until her grandfather reluctantly handed her some wood and a knife and showed her how to cut away from her body so she would not harm herself" (39). From early on, Klara's talent and drive will not be denied, despite her gender.

Tilman Becker, Klara's brother, has wanderlust and cannot stay confined within his family or their farm. Tilman's mother convinces her husband to chain their young son to a wall because she "couldn't bear to lose him" and she "sensed that one day he would leave forever, and that his disappearance would take place in the autumn during the same hunting season when he had been conceived" (63). Here, Helga Becker is given that often revered sense, mother's intuition, a sense that tells her accurately that her son will leave, but fails to tell her the consequences of her efforts to prevent that leaving. Tilman howls like an animal while chained to the wall, until his younger sister gives him a hammer to pry the chain's nails from the wall and he disappears down the road "his chain trailing after him like print on the page of the road, like the end, or the beginning, of the story" (71). Helga's fate, her punishment for this act, is predictable, and tersely expressed: "Helga would never recover – not from his imprisonment and not from his escape" (67).

Helga Becker is a puzzle. In some ways she recognizes the subordination of women in her world, and in others, she follows the dictates of patriarchal motherhood. She proudly teaches her daughter the craft of tailoring, instilling in Klara the defiance of the female term "dressmaker" that falls on women: "Any fool can be a dressmaker" she teaches her daughter, "Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I can't be a tailor" (45). But the wisdom in that comment does not seep into Helga's views of motherhood. She reasons that she would not be considered a "good" mother if she allowed her son to roam the land, that she should civilize him to conformity, and that she should protect him from himself. For that, she loses not only her son, but her story: she is written out of the narrative, entering only briefly in Klara's memory from then on.

Along with this commentary about mothers who restrict or contain their children, *The Stone Carvers* also offers a brief, but vivid, characterization of an unsuccessful mother who becomes a social outcast. Still dragging his chain behind him, Tilman meets Crazy Phoebe, homeless after the death of her child and living on the road. Phoebe takes him to Ham Bone, a junk yard owner with the skills of a blacksmith. Released from his chain and sleeping fitfully in a warm corner, Tilman watches as Ham Bone, obviously part of Phoebe's past life, peels the many layers of clothing from Phoebe's body in order to give her a bath. Tilman is mesmerized by the youthful female body that emerges:

> The scene that unfolded was one that Tilman would never forget. Years later when he came at last to love someone, the memory of this night would fall like rain into his mind: the gentle tenderness, the sound of falling water. He would remember the way the young woman's buttocks and calves shone when the man had put water there, the glistening snails' tracks on her belly that, as an adult, Tilman would realize meant that she had borne a child. He would remember the tears on the large man's face as he moved the cloth under her breasts and down the insides of her thighs. And he would remember her utter submissiveness after all her protestations. (183)

Crazy Phoebe, alienates herself from conventional society after the death of her child. Like Tilman, she cannot stay within the confines of an environment that expects from her what she cannot give. The markers of motherhood on her body are permanent reminders that the child she birthed did not thrive. She cannot, despite her submissiveness to Ham Bone's tender ministrations, let him continue: "If I was to let you get at me," she says, "we'd only have another baby that would die" (184). Clearly, Phoebe needs some grief counseling but, in Urquhart's narrative, that counseling is something outside the realm of Ham Bone and Phoebe's underclass existence. This existence echoes *Away*'s commentary that "all stories are born of sorrows" (298); in *The Stone Carvers*, Phoebe cannot stay within Ham Bone's protective realm because "home is where sorrow is at" (49).

Urquhart's sixth, and most recent work, *A Map of Glass*, depicts several strikingly different versions of abject and idealized motherhood connected through time and space, thus continuing Urquhart's eloquent meditation on the intricate imbrication of history, place, and marriage. *A Map of Glass* features several contrasting mother portrayals, as well as a third female character who is not a mother. Jerome's mother is frozen in an abusive relationship and memories of the emotional violence of his parents' marriage haunt him in his adult life. His memory includes camping trips in which his father would find the intrusions of civilization into the wilderness environment personally insulting, and take that insult out on his mother, "berat[ing] [her] about the food she had brought, her recent haircut, and the way she looked in a swimsuit" (15). For Jerome, the image of "his mother standing quietly by the water with her imperfect flesh exposed" (15) colours his childhood memories as "tawdry, embarrassing, something to be quickly discarded and forgotten" (15-16). Despite continuing memories of his childhood home, such as his parents' bedroom with "the decorative lampshades and doilies that were his mother's sad attempt to bring some intimacy and joy into this corner of her life" (64), Jerome protects himself with a veneer of indifference, one that gives him an impenetrability both as love and artist. He develops a strange relationship with fifty-three year old Sylvia Bradley, the disaffected woman who leaves the safety of her husband's home to find out more about her lover's death from Jerome, the person who discovered his body floating on an ice floe in the St. Lawrence River.

Sylvia has a mysterious social disability that Urquhart does not clarify, much like Maud's child's vague affliction in *The Whirlpool*. Taken to doctors in the big city as a child, she refuses the doctor's doll play treatment, and "develop[s] ways to shut out the doctor, her mother, the dollhouse" (40). Her resolute closure to treatment and silence in the doctor's presence, earns Sylvia her mother's disapproval: "she knew her punishment would be her mother's anger, her mother's refusal to look at her all the way home on the train" (41). The punishment continues after she is put to bed that night, as she "hear[s] the adult argument begin, her own name tossed back and forth between her mother and father long into the night" (41). In a telling description of patriarchal motherhood, Sylvia reflects on the physical contact between her mother and herself, and knows that "her mother's few attempts at embraces had been meant to restrain her, to cause her to stop doing something, or to move her in a direction other than the one she had wanted to take" (70). Urquhart depicts Sylvia's mother as not only acquiescing to her husband's control over her and her daughter, but also surreptitiously contributing to Sylvia's lack of life possibilities in a role that implies hidden motives of jealousy or resentment. When Malcolm, the young doctor who will become Sylvia's husband, comes to dinner at her parents' home, he suggests that Sylvia could perhaps work part time in his office:

> Her father seemed pleased; her mother had looked irritated, doubtful. "Sylvia will never be able to maintain a job," she said.
>
> Malcolm had bristled. "She could most certainly maintain a part-time job," he said, "even after she is married."
>
> "Good lord," her mother had replied briskly, "who could ever have the patience for that?" She was not referring to the job. (84)

Sylvia's mother is an unlikable character, steeped in resentment and self-interest, somewhat reminiscent of Ann Frear's mother in *Changing Heaven*. Her ideas of her daughter's future stem from only what her daughter will not be able to do, including the prospect of becoming what her mother is supposed to produce, another wife and mother. Sylvia's mother also harbours the same sexual repressiveness that Ann Frear's mother instilled in her daughter. When the subject of a marriage between Sylvia and Malcolm comes up, it is welcomed and even brokered by her father, but not her mother, who turns on her daughter one night in the kitchen:

> She had spun around angrily from her place at the sink, suds and water dripping from her hands. "You'll have to let him touch you," she had hissed in the direction of her daughter. "You'll have to let him touch you in ways you can't even imagine. And you have never, never let me, your father, or anyone else touch you. You won't be able to do it, and he'll leave, and we'll all be worse off than before." (86)

To Sylvia, her mother is a "dark and pulsing presence" (91), who instills fears in her daughter instead of examining the fears in herself. The story is a puzzling one, however, in that Sylvia does not have to deal with unwanted touching from Malcolm. He is the epitome of a tolerant husband, who promises his wife that he will never touch her until she wants him to. Sylvia decides early on that she will never want him to, and that determines the tenor of their marriage: contented, but platonic. What induces Sylvia to enter into a love affair with Andrew Woodman later on is not really clear, but the suggestion is that under the layers of undiagnosed mysterious ailments that supposedly plague Sylvia Bradley, is a woman of agency with physical desires and a need for intimacy that could be deemed completely "normal."

The parallel nineteenth-century story that Sylvia brings to Jerome by way of Andrew's diary, relates the history of the Woodman family and their shipbuilding industry comes to light. This diary forms the second part of the novel, and shifts the perspective of the story from Sylvia to Andrew. In true genealogy fashion, Andrew begins as far back in his family tree as he can go: his great-great-grandfather. The entries are serial family events: births, marriages, pregnancies, and deaths, not necessarily in that order. Perhaps not willing to leave the exploration into eccentric spinsterhood that she began with Klara Becker's character in *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart includes in that family genealogy an interesting spinster, Annabelle Woodman.

The Woodman family hires an orphan girl, Marie, when Annabelle and her brother Branwell are still children. Marie ultimately rises from servant status to wife with an unexpected pregnancy and a forced separation from Branwell who eventually marries Marie with Annabelle's help. Annabelle finds herself drawn to Marie from the beginning and sets out to befriend her. Years later, Annabelle will view her childhood friend and ultimately sister-in-law, Marie, as "her other, her more beautiful self," feeling that "their two bodies would overlap and become three-dimensional like the twinned images on the photo cards she slipped into the stereoscope on Sunday afternoons" (178). Although Marie never seems to fit into her new life location, remains definitively inter-class, and slides into the narrative background as a static, flat character, Annabelle's sense of Marie as the other half of her very self continues as they grow into womanhood.

Annabelle takes on the spinster role of caring for her widower father in his declining years, and Marie takes the traditional route of becoming a wife and mother. Years later, on Marie's death, Annabelle feels utter grief and shame at not being available as her "better, more beautiful self, lay trembling on the edge of death" (276). But Marie's death had been a while in coming, her existence slowly being buried under the sand that inundated her home due to the faulty agricultural practices of her son and other farmers who grow nothing but the profitable barley crop on their fields, never rotating them, depleting the soil and its nutrients. After her death, Marie's husband, Branwell,[10] finds her loss most deeply resonant standing in her kitchen, the heart of her world:

> Her beautiful cook stove, The Kitchen Queen, stood unlit in the kitchen, its decorative features and its copper boiler cold and unpolished. . . . the last time he had opened one of the ovens, he had been appalled by the sight of the tiny dunes that had formed inside it, and the excess sand that descended like a pale brown curtain to the floor. (281)

While Branwell misses his wife's domestic presence, the narrative suggests that it is Annabelle who reads more deeply into the filling of Marie's stove with sand. Annabelle is the one who survives, the classic spinster figure, not wife, not mother, but dutiful daughter. Somehow she stands as the most contented character of all at the end of the story.

* * *

In summary, mothers in Jane Urquhart's novels are usually absent or in severe distress, standing in stark contrast to the rhapsodic odes that govern popular assumptions associated with the modern maternal icon. Because motherhood in crisis is a recursive theme in Urquhart's novels, they form a collective reflection of the disparity between heralded ideals of mothering and the lived conflicts those ideals inflame when individual lives do not conform to the unexamined assumptions that dominate mainstream values. Potent recurring themes and intriguing secondary characters speak to the diversity of the lived Canadian experience, and demonstrate how Canadian social complexities and experience have been and continues to be influenced by European roots and connections. Yet, even with the thematic diversity present in her writing, women's issues find prominence in all Urquhart's novels. A sadness pervades her entire body of work, and much of that sadness comes from portrayals, or rather non-portrayals, of mothers and motherhood: very few characters in her novels have living mothers, and very few characters in her novels become mothers.[11] Moreover, those that do become mothers often have very difficult, traumatic experiences with motherhood: for example, *The Whirlpool*'s Maud Grady agonizes over the future of her silent, autistic child, and *The Stone Carvers*' Crazy Phoebe dons layers and layers of thick heavy clothing to disguise her youth and womanhood as she takes to the hobo life after the death of her child. Each one of these characters brings a unique sensibility of experience, one that illustrates the Canadian social order as a disorder where plurality of perspective must replace repressive notions of assigned identity categories and impossible universality.

---

[10] Branwell, not insignificantly given Urquhart's previously demonstrated interest and admiration for Emily Bronte, takes his name from Bronte's beloved, troubled brother, although Urquhart's narrative specifically denies that the family's ambitious original patriarch, Joseph Woodman, "would commemorate the dissolute brother of the by then famous Bronte sisters as he had never, to anyone's knowledge, read a work of fiction" (156).

Nestled amongst the usual Urquhart themes of art, history, landscape, and memory, to name a few, is a sustained exploration into strained representations of motherhood. From a feminist perspective, Urquhart's body of work is an important fictional narrative commentary about the impact of idealized versions of motherhood on the lives of Canadian women. In Urquhart's novels, female characters who are not mothers are sidelined or exiled from active life, trapped in servile positions, or simply not present. When the childless Fleda McDougal of *The Whirlpool*, vanishes from her own story without a word or indication of where she will go, she suggests that women who choose not to become mothers must leave the central social arena: "Departure. She could no longer live the closeted life of the recent past. And she could not live, forever, in the dream house of this grey, obsessive landscape" (218). For Fleda, the option of staying, continuing to fulfill the role expected of her, is not viable. She becomes the absent, non-mother who did not wait for absence through death, choosing instead, an invisible life of self-determined direction. Thus, Urquhart's novels depict how social conventions punish aberrations from expected maternal behaviour by exile or death; those characters who do become mothers must be prepared for isolation and angst no matter how they engage with their status as beings absorbed into the institution of motherhood.

---

[11] Urquhart interviews reveal no particular biographical source for this sadness. To date, she has produced no memoir or other designated autobiographical text, other than "Losing Paul" in which she talks about the night her first husband was killed in a car accident.

Finally, in Urquhart's novels, maternal characters depict a stark contrast to popular denotations of motherhood consistent with obvious, indisputable "inherent goodness or justness." The sadness that pervades Urquhart's entire body of work finds its source largely in the maternal portrayals it offers. Because motherhood in crisis is a recursive theme in Urquhart's novels, they form a collective reflection of the disparity between heralded ideals of mothering and the lived conflicts those ideals inflame when individual lives do not conform to the unexamined assumptions that attempt to dominate mainstream values. Together, Urquhart's six novels form a complex reflection about issues associated with mothering today. Western society's version of the maternal figure wraps her in idealized, inherited assumptions. Similarly, Urquhart's novels perform in much the same way as the works of women writers in the Romantic Period did, works in which women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter, Mary Shelley, as Anne K. Mellors comments, “explored the physical and psychic price paid by women who too fully subscribed to the ideology of maternity and domesticity” (10). With intertextual narrative elements from virtually all post-Enlightenment periods, with effects both predictable and surprising, and with parallel stories set in the nineteenth century and contemporary Canada, Jane Urquhart’s novels illustrate that, while the twenty-first-century conditions of women’s lives in the western world may feel “post-feminist,” those improved conditions are relatively recent and tenuous, still in conflict with deeply embedded institutional conventions such as those attached to the words “mother” and “motherhood.”

Afterword to Chapter 1: I'm an Intertext

One of my aunts used to tell me that she could read me like a book. I never really knew what she meant, but I hoped she was misreading whatever book she thought I was. Now I know that if I were a book, I could never be just one. I would more likely be a hybrid, an intertext where countless old stories mingle, chat, and haunt each other while waiting for new ones to arrive. I like that notion, but it makes me wish I'd known about intertextuality back when I was a twenty-year old standing in front of an intimidating relative who claimed to be able to read me thoroughly.

I have been a reader as far back as I can remember. Although our home was not an intellectual one, books were always a part of our environment. Largely consumers of popular culture texts, my parents had different tastes in reading material: my father had a stack of bestselling paperback novels in his nightstand, and my mother an equivalent stack of women's magazines and Reader's Digest condensed books. On Saturdays, my mother would marshal her small band of charges out the back door – me with my younger siblings in tow – and aim us down the block to the local library, a miniscule collection of rooms that shared space in the same building as the neighbourhood police station.

For my mother, the library was a safe place to send us; we would be in no danger of getting into trouble and she would benefit from a few hours of quiet. For my little brother and sisters, it was a welcome excursion. For me, it was an escape to different worlds. A librarian would gather the smaller children around her for "story hour," thus entertaining my little sisters and brother, relieving me of *that duty. I roamed up and down the aisles, reaching for book after book. I always went home with as many as I could carry. In retrospect, I feel as if I read each and every volume in that library, some twice or more.*

During those years, I turned to all the conventional books for young Canadian girls, the most prominent examples being Little Women *by Louisa May Alcott and, of course, Lucy Maud Montgomery's* Anne of Green Gables. *In my initial exposure to those novels, I would never have thought to question the underlying essentialist logic that all women are destined to be wives and mothers. My only defense for this inquisitive lack is that I was probably only ten or twelve years old when I read them. I did, however, think that Anne Shirley was a little too perfectly perky, and the dependable Meg March a little too, well, dependable. Only Jo March caught my interest, always writing and imagining things with words. In retrospect, I am intrigued by my early attraction to Jo, the most resistant of Alcott's four fictional sisters, the one who wanted to be a boy and abhorred the notion that she might one day have to grow up prim, be a "Miss March," and wear long gowns. I was delighted to read recently that Jo March is now considered one of the earliest feminist characters in American children's literature.*[1]

Although I found these books enjoyable enough, in my limited estimation, they could not come close to my favourite reading material: the Nancy Drew mystery series. I can't remember exactly how many of those volumes I read, but I know it was at least fifty. I do remember that once I finished one, I couldn't wait to

---

[1] This claim is found in the introduction to Anne Hiebert Alton's 2001 edition of *Little Women* (26).

get my hands on the next one. I was infatuated with that "girl sleuth";[2] *I admired how she ingeniously figured out the answers to questions that puzzled everyone else around her, how she always knew how to get her girlfriends – that tom-boy George and the nervous Bess – and her boyfriend Ned to do what she wanted them to. I envied how she was always out doing things, not staying home helping with the ironing and looking after crying, fighting siblings. Back then, I did not question the narrative convenience of Nancy's dead mother, the relationship between Nancy and the family housekeeper, or the portrayal of upper middle-class affluence. I just read every word as it lay on the page.*

I did try reading other mystery series, but, as far as I was concerned, The Bobbsey Twins *and* The Hardy Boys[3] *had nothing on Nancy Drew. It's not that I wanted to change myself into the fearless Nancy; no, I wanted to be Nancy Drew's author, Carolyn Keene, and be able to write intoxicating stories just like hers. Little did I know at the time that Carolyn Keene did not exist: Nancy Drew had been dreamed up by a man named Edward Stratemeyer, a creator and publisher of children's books, the very person who had also dreamed up both The Bobbsey Twins and The Hardy Boys. Had I known that no one person by the name of Carolyn Keene held the pen that drew Nancy, I likely would have felt like I had been somewhat duped. But this would have lasted only for a few years because soon other types of books garnered my attention.*

---

[2] I borrow the phrase "girl sleuth" from the title of Melanie Rehak's book, *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her.*

[3] *The Bobbsey Twins* were created in 1904 as a "series of stories about a group of well-off children who had adventures all over the world and always remembered their manners" (Rehak 23). *The Hardy Boys* followed in 1927, and featured "two brothers of high school age . . .the sons of a professional private investigator" (Rehak 108). The Nancy Drew series originated in 1929.

In my early teenage years, I was drawn to big predictable sagas: books like Kathleen Winsor's Forever Amber, *the 1957 emotionally-wrought story of love and childbirth in seventeenth-century England, and Rona Jaffe's* The Best of Everything, *the 1958 tale of young women taking on New York, the first of fourteen similar Jaffe novels. Not surprisingly, English – or Literature and Composition as it was called in my high school – was my favourite subject. In my high school years at Vincent Massey Collegiate in Winnipeg, the wonderful David Arnason*[4] *was my teacher. I don't remember knowing at the time that he is of Icelandic heritage, as am I. This ancestral link is the most distant, and thus the most mythical, one in my family: of my four grandparents – two of Irish descent, one Scottish, and one Icelandic – the only one I couldn't ever know was my maternal grandmother. Whether or not the Icelandic heritage I shared with my English teacher made any mystical impact on how I related to high school English, I don't know. What I do know is that, in my favourite class, my favourite teacher made me sit right in front of his desk to lessen my tendency to be distracted by, or cause distractions among, my girlfriends. If I attempted to stray from that location, he would simply point at the vacant seat in front of him and make the following request: "Miss McIvor, would you please come home?"*

I remember writing an essay called, quite unimaginatively, "Imagination." Something unusual happened to me as I wrote it. Any anxiety I may have felt about the assigned topic faded into the background, and the words flowed out on

---

[4] My former teacher has, in the years since, become a well-known Canadian author who still teaches at the University of Manitoba and writes poetry, short stories, novels, and non-fiction from his Gimli studio overlooking Lake Winnipeg. Two of his most recent works are *King Jerry* and *The Demon Lover*.

the page as a wonderful new pleasure took control of my hand. The most amazing feeling of satisfaction came over me as I worked on it, manipulating words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and creating a whole something out of nothing. I think I had a smile on my face when I handed it in.

The day he returned the marked essays in class, Mr. Arnason (for I can never think of him as anything but Mr. Arnason) remarked that he had received an essay that was either one of the worst pieces of student writing ever to cross his desk or one of the finest. He said he wasn't sure which of those categories it fell into, but. . . . Not bothering to finish his sentence, and with a big gentle smile on his face, he handed me my paper. In my memory's eye, I can still see the huge red A- written at the top.

Talking with me after that class, Mr. Arnason encouraged me to continue writing and studying English after high school. He asked if he could keep my paper. I couldn't imagine why he would want it, but said yes feeling pleased that he did. In the years since, I've often wished I could read it again and wonder occasionally if it has disintegrated completely over time, met its fate in a cold metal shredder, or lies yellowed and faded at the bottom of a dusty box somewhere. Back at home that evening, I told my parents what Mr. Arnason had said about my pursuing English studies. They balked. University is very hard and expensive, they said. You need some solid training so that you can get a good job in case your future husband can't provide for you, they said. We know what's best for our own daughter, they said.

They weren't being mean or insensitive, just responding as they thought parents should. When the time came for me to make a decision about post-secondary education, I was eager to comply with their wishes. Although many of my friends and I had taken to reading controversial and confusing (at least to me) books like Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead *and* Atlas Shrugged, *my mindset about how to live my life was unimaginative. I followed my parents' direction: I became an x-ray technician, and then a wife, and then a mom. Without a blink of an eye, I chose a conventional direction, but one that, for me, would be full of surprises.*

It wasn't until my children were in school, that I really began to read again. Instead of buying the latest Danielle Steele or Jackie Collins novel at the grocery store checkout to read mindlessly during their naptimes, I started going to the library. In doing so, I discovered some enticing Canadian women writers. Although it would be a few years yet before I discovered Carol Shields and even longer before I read anything by Jane Urquhart, I did discover books by Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence, both of whom wrote about places and people I recognized. In a time when I somewhat reluctantly began to wrestle with a growing awareness that I was boxed in by invisible walls, I lost myself in these books. Soon I discovered that not only was I beginning to read meaningfully, but also, in some vague way, I was beginning to think differently about what I read. Occasionally, I would even pick up a pen and write.

In the eighties and nineties, as my children grew from toddlerhood to adolescence, my choice of reading material changed once again, a change that puzzled me at first. I started looking to non-fiction: Gail Sheehy's Passages *told* *me about the ups and downs of life and Susan Brownmiller's* Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape *fired an anger in me that I had never known before. I began to read biographies, but only of women: Mary, Queen of Scots, Eleanor Roosevelt, Golda Meir. The world around me began to look much different, but I didn't ask why. I read not like a literary critic, but rather a sponge soaking up as much information and knowledge as I could get. Eventually I stopped reading biographies and returned to fiction, but I was a different reader by then. I began to see fact in fiction.*

One year, I think it was 1994, I unwrapped a small gift on Christmas morning and Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries *fell into my hands. It came from a thoughtful friend who had written the following inscription on the title page: "for cold winter nights and hot sunny sand, for the heart and mind . . . from the same." The hot sunny sand was unavailable to me that year, so I read* The Stone Diaries *over one cold weekend wrapped in blankets and slippers, sipping hot tea. The story was unusual and I spent days looking at the black and white photographs that accompanied it. Although I devoured the book over a weekend, I felt uneasy about it, perhaps because I didn't want think about getting to the end of a life, like Daisy Goodwill Flett did, only to find myself living in some rest home in Sarasota, Florida, surrounded by old people, not knowing whether I'm dreaming or dead. Or perhaps I was puzzled by the way Shields disregarded the way a novel was expected to look.*

Regardless of why, I was definitely intrigued and soon sought out Shields' other novels. Unlike The Stone Diaries, *I found her early fiction to be like a strong* *pot of tea, well-made, but predictable and steeped in domestic optimism. While I couldn't completely share Shields' sunny everyday outlook, I continued to be fascinated with* The Stone Diaries' *unusual components: the chapter categories, the many letters, and the photographs of real people Shields uses to create visual images of fictional characters.*

Still, my slow emergence from what I think of as my "mushroom" years, inundated as they were by the weight of dark musty patriarchal fertilizer, was still incomplete. Half in and half out of my cocoon, I didn't quite realize that my fascination with Shields was anything more than just curiosity, and didn't know yet that my return to formal studies was about to begin.

Chapter Two:

Dissecting Goodness: Domestic Optimism in Carol Shields' Novels

After Carol Shields died on July 16, 2003, news reports about her life and work filled the Canadian media for several days, reflecting widespread public admiration for the American-born Canadian author and Shields' esteemed place in Canadian literature. Two days after her death, *The Globe and Mail* dedicated most of its front page and much inside copy to Shields, including a short testimonial article by Jane Urquhart that heralded Shields' "generosity of spirit." In this tribute, the domesticity that is at the centre of all Shields' fiction resonates in Urquhart's closing metaphor, one selected by the newspaper's editors for their front page headlines: "she leaves an empty chair at all our tables, one that can never be filled" (A1). Further into her tribute, Urquhart comments that Shields approaches her domestic fictions[1] "fearlessly, and with a kind of tender curiosity." Quoting her colleague, Urquhart recalls that Shields "once said that there is no such thing as an ordinary life." Indeed, in her novels, Shields mines the minute details of conventional middle-class North American life for everyday nuggets that add nuance to what Urquhart calls "the shadows and joys of [that] experience" (A6). Urquhart closes her commemoration by describing the always generous and graciously optimistic demeanour Shields brought to all her relationships, whether professional or personal.

---

[1] I use the term "domestic fiction" as a descriptive reference to the conventional family settings of Shields' novels. As a genre, domestic fiction has a long tradition that could fruitfully be explored in relation to Shields' work, an endeavour that is outside the scope of this project. Relevant works that investigate domestic fiction include James Kilroy's *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Family Ideology and Narrative Form* and Helen Thompson's *Ingenuous Subjection: Compliance and Power in the Eighteenth-Century Domestic Novel.*

None of the above statements of tribute are particularly unique and some could even be seen as typical of the sad sentimentality that accompanies most moments of death. However, Urquhart's comments do take on an intriguing quirkiness when considering the contrast between Shields' enduringly optimistic portrayal of domesticity that tends to take a favourable view of both existing conditions and the future they portend. As I have demonstrated in Chapter One, as Urquhart has an almost relentlessly pessimistic depiction of that same sphere: patriarchal motherhood: she takes a negative view of existing conditions and the future they promise.

From her first novel to her last, Shields demonstrates an optimism that permeates her narrative skills and coincides with her stated belief that language "affirms . . . our humanity" (Wilkins 97). This affirmation of the human condition points to the optimistic tone that pervades Shields' work. Her sense that her characters live in the best of all possible worlds, even with its irritations and flaws, is indicative of conventional values and beliefs. Significant among these values is a confidence in the inherent good intentions of the western patriarchal tradition and a belief in the ultimate victory of good over evil in the universe. These ingenuous credos allow holders to accept the social order that exists as a society that is in everyone's best interests and that will ultimately result in successful outcomes. Thus, the mundane repetitiveness of western middle-class domesticity is, for Shields, a life adventure, and optimism the necessary equipment. Her novels also suggest that mere optimism may not be enough.

With a 1998 breast cancer diagnosis hovering over her life, in the first paragraph of what she may have sensed would be her last novel, *Unless*, Shields writes that "happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head" (1). In North American society today, happiness is a ubiquitous, but murky, abstract that has a powerful, but evasive, influence on mainstream notions about what the goals of an individual life should be. Western society's pursuit of happiness is, like domesticity, a commonplace, yet mysterious, entity that, perhaps because of its mundane ubiquity, draws Shields' narrative attention often.

This discussion delves into Shields' novels for their sense of optimism and asks the following questions: Is the optimistic tone in these narratives contemplative or resistant, and do the novels' cheery underlying assumptions shift at all with each subsequent book? If Shields' last novel, *Unless*, stands as a willing summation of those that precede it, is its troubled opening observation about happiness consistent with the novel's ending, one that is typical of Shields' books with everyone snug in their proper beds at the end of the story? Is the examination of conventional female "goodness" that takes centre stage in *Unless* a late feminist emergence from an author nearing the end of her life or has an exploration of goodness been quietly at work in the subtexts of all the novels she wrote between 1976 and 2002?

In my search for answers to these questions, I drew from existing critical analysis of Shields' work and, for insight from Shields herself, from several published interviews. Then I looked into how women and goodness have been historically and ideologically linked, before I moved into the content of her books. Although Shields writes in many forms, I chose to focus my work on her novels for two reasons: first, to maintain a genre consistency with this project's analysis of both Jane Urquhart's and Margaret Laurence's novels, and second, to facilitate my dissertation's umbrella inquiry into what Coral Ann Howells refers to as "the necessarily fictive dimension within life writing" (206), or what

I think of as the extended narrative connection between imagining lived and unlived lives.

Popular understanding of what constitutes a working artist is often connected to an image of a somehow divinely gifted soul channeling her or his creations into being. Nevertheless, artistic works are, as Mary Eagleton writes, "the product[s] of a network of internalised social and historical determinants" (*Canadian Literature*, 71); thus, rather than lofty revelation, art is, in effect, the imagined expression of daily life. When I first began to read Shields' work, it did not feel like classic literary art, but something comforting and familiar. I could see my family in the families she portrays.

Initially I saw Shields as a reluctant feminist, a notion that dissipated as I read through various interviews with Shields. Now I tend to view Shields as a writer who contemplates the second-wave feminist issues of her time in narratives that are as much a kind of fictive ethnography of cultural context as they are fiction.

Shields represents women's lives in ways reminiscent of the maternal feminism at the heart of feminism's first wave, when the goals for equal political rights for women were founded on "an affirmation of their role in biological and social reproduction" (Valverde *Gender Conflicts*, 3). Frequently narrated in the language of the female domestic world, the first-wave story of maternal feminism advocated that women needed enhanced social and political presence in order to enhance their contribution as mothers who could improve society through an increased public role. A prominent example is Canadian maternal feminist writer Nellie McClung who most eloquently expresses her maternal feminism in her 1915 work, *In Times Like These*, a non-fiction collection of essays and articles in which she denounces the political occurrence of World War I and argues that, if women had a political voice, they would not have allowed it to happen.[2]

Shields updates this maternal feminism. Her novels reflect awakening liberal feminist values that depict the dilemmas facing white middle-class women who have invested their lives in heterosexual normativity and who must subsequently engage with rising feminist ideas swirling around their lives in the cultural times of the 1960s and 70s. The presence of this narrative thread in her work is not surprising, given that Shields married in 1957, just prior to the beginning of second-wave feminism in the 1960s. Also not surprising, given that Shields followed the conventional path by having the first of her five children within a year of her marriage, is Shields' strong narrative engagement with the patriarchal institution of motherhood, an engagement vividly present on the pages of all her fiction.

Well-known as an award-winning novelist, Shields ventured into many different writing genres. Officially, her writing career began in 1972 with the appearance of her first collection of poetry, *Others*; a second book of poetry, *Intersect*, followed in 1974. Like many of her fictional characters, Shields studied and worked in academia, producing a critical literary study, *Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision*, in 1976, and, many years later, in 2001, a biography of Jane Austen. Once published, Shields produced new work regularly and, during her thirty-year career, was a prolific, multifaceted writer. In addition to the eight novels I will refer to in this discussion – *Small Ceremonies* (1976),

---

[2] Maternal feminism is currently being re-invoked, in largely this same sense as McClung's 1915 treatise. The American actor, Sally Fields, in televised programming that aired September 17, 2007, accepted her Emmy award with the statement that "if mothers ruled the world, there would be no war." As well, Christian organizations, largely American, are presently mobilizing maternal feminism as an argument for stay-at-home mothering (*Time Links*).

The Box Garden (1977), *Swann: A Mystery* (1987), *Happenstance* (1997),[3] *The Republic of Love* (1992), *The Stone Diaries* (1993), *Larry's Party* (1997), and *Unless* (2002) – Shields authored many other works: a later book of poetry, *Coming to Canada* (1992); several plays, including *Departures and Arrivals* (1990) and *Thirteen Hands* (1993); and three collections of short stories, *Various Miracles* (1985), *The Orange Fish* (1989), and *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (2000).

Shields' readiness to work in various forms is consistent with a disposition that also welcomed working with other writers. As Urquhart's nod to her "generosity of spirit" suggests, Shields was a willing collaborator and worked as a coauthor many times: with her longtime friend Blanche Howard, Shields created an epistolary novel, *A Celibate Season* (1991); in drama, she partnered with her daughter Catherine Shields for the 1997 play, *Fashion, Power, Guilt and the Charity of Families*; and the following year she joined with Dave Williamson to create *Anniversary: A Comedy*. Shields also worked in an editorial capacity with material from other writers: in 2001, she co-edited, with Marjorie Anderson, an anthology of women's writing, *Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told*. Shields and Anderson followed that book up with a sequel, *Dropped Threads 2: More of What We Aren't Told* in 2003.[4]

As she published more work, Shields' writing readily found a loyal reading audience, offering as it does conventional middle-class family settings and dilemmas that provide readers from that social sphere with images they find or wish to find in their own lives. From a scholarly perspective, critical analysis of Shields' works slowly began to appear in the 1980s and 90s. Academic interest in her work grew more intense with the publication of her fifth novel, *Swann*, which to date has drawn at least eight literary critics to comment on its experimental form and content. Analysis of her work increased once again as Shields' later novels, *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry's Party*, and *Unless*, appeared. Critical work about Shields' oeuvre continues to expand today in both volume and scope.[5]

---

[3] Although I count *Happenstance* as one novel here, it originated as two separate works. In 1980, Shields published *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, followed in 1982 by *Happenstance*. In 1997, Vintage Canada combined the two narratives into one book with two separate parts. *A Fairly Conventional Woman* re-appears as *Happenstance: The Wife's Story* and the original *Happenstance* appears as *Happenstance: The Husband's Story*. I work from the 1997 edition in this discussion.

[4] After Shields' death, Anderson carried on alone, publishing *Dropped Threads 3: Beyond the Small Circle* in 2006. In the foreword to that edition, Anderson recalls Shields' "wisdom and generous spirit" (x).

In 2003, the year of her death, two edited collections of analytical commentary about Shields' work were published: *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*, edited by Neil K. Besner; and *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, edited by Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. In his introduction to the latter, Edward Eden writes that Carol Shields' fiction "find[s] the mystery and otherness embedded in what many ways is a narrow, conventional, and restricted cultural space" (4). That space is, of course, the middle-class North American home: the domestic space of white western families such as the one that Shields herself grew up in and the one that she would create with her husband, Don Shields. Despite Eden's gesture in that direction, however, the critical focus of his collection is not domesticity, but the narrative experiments with form, content, and genre that Shields works into her writing. The other collection, *The Arts of a Writing Life*, also does not focus on domesticity in Shields' work; as editor, Besner asks contributors to reflect on their connections with Shields and to examine her work for its many artistic representations and commentary. In his introductory statement, Besner says that this collection finds its motivation in the many artistic genres Shields both works in and writes into her narratives. However, Besner gestures towards the domestic centre of Shields' stories when he considers the "paradoxical proposition" that "a writer's life and her work are necessarily separate but inevitably related" (9).

---

[5] In April of 2007, McGill's University Press published a new collection of critical commentary, *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*, edited by Marta Dorak and Manina Jones.

In the latter years of the twentieth century, two Canadian writing journals recognized Shields' influence as a widely read Canadian writer and each dedicated an issue to her work: *A Room of One's Own* in 1989 and *Prairie Fire* in 1995. Although it does not specifically point to conventional domesticity as a theme in Shields' oeuvre to that point, the special issue of *A Room of One's Own* strongly implies its significance: the issue's cover features a photograph of a young Shields, fresh and demure in her white wedding dress, her charming smile surrounded by a halo of white veil. Published six years later, the special issue of *Prairie Fire* also features a photo of Shields on its cover; however, this is an older Shields, now a confident writer, seated casually in a park with a wooden sculpture in the background and a manuscript on her knee. Writing yet another introduction to a collection of work by and about Shields for *Prairie Fire*, Neil K. Besner observes that asking for writing about Shields inevitably invokes "responses at once personal and scholarly" (5). The issue's contents bear out his statement, featuring reminiscences, vignettes, and interviews, many created by close associates such as Blanche Howard, Marjorie Anderson, and Dave Williamson.

As she published more work, articles examining Shields' writing skills appeared often in academic journals. In 1989, *Signature* published Barbara Godard's analysis of Shields' mystery novel *Swann*, "Sleuthing: Feminists Re/Writing the Detective Novel," and, in 1995, *Studies in Canadian Literature* included Winnifred M. Mellor's "'The Simple Container of Our Existence': Narrative Ambiguity in Carol Shields' *The Stone*

Diaries." Godard and Mellor, although examining different novels and different features of these particular works of fiction, both bring feminist approaches to Shields' work. In an article that appeared in 2001, Conny Steenman-Marcusse examines Shields' work as "actively articulat[ing] women's voices in the traditionally private genres of the journal form and (auto)biography" (26). Despite these examples, feminist approaches are not prominent in explorations into Shields' fiction; indeed, little published feminist analysis of Shields appears after Mellor's 1995 essay until the very recent 2006 Katherine Weese essay, "The 'Invisible' Woman: Narrative Strategies in *The Stone Diaries,*" in which Weese examines the novel's multiple voices as "employing various feminist narrative strategies to restore voice and visibility to [the protagonist, Daisy Goodwill Flett's] apparently voiceless invisible character" (91).

As with intellectual explorations into the work of both Jane Urquhart and Margaret Laurence, critical analyses of Shields' work take a variety of perspectives: some writers examine her treatment of Canadian identity (Werlock, Hammill), others look at the "circulation of power across the Canada-US border" (Roberts 86), while several scholars investigate life-writing as represented in Shields' fiction (Mellor, Williams, Buss, Weese). In an approach similar to what several critical investigations bring to Jane Urquhart's work,[6] some critics also take up Shields' writing for its relationship to historiography (Niederhoff) and postmodernism (Steenman-Marcusse). As with many investigations into Margaret Laurence's fiction,[7] critical analysis of Shields' work also probes representations of its highly symbolic content (Slethaug). Sandwiched in the decades between Laurence and Urquhart, Shields' work has invited both similar and dissimilar critical analyses. Examining the types of approaches literary critics bring to these writers' works reflects not only their variety but also time-related transitions in critical thinking. Shifting attitudes about and towards feminism in the short decades that separate the work of these three writers are significantly reflected in the critical parameters used to explore their work: to this point, Shields' fiction has attracted less feminist analysis than the earlier work of Laurence, but more than the later work of Urquhart.

---

[6] In my first chapter, I offer a summary of criticism about Urquhart's work to date, and note that only a few critics have examined her work from feminist perspectives.

[7] In the third chapter, I summarize the considerable amount of critical analysis available on Laurence's novels and note that feminist perspectives have regularly been used to examine her fiction.

Still consistent with the "generous spirit" Urquhart acknowledges in her posthumous tribute, Shields seemed very willing to make herself available for interviews during her career, and interviews with her usually read as cozy informal conversations. Nevertheless, this informality is not indicative of a lack of substance, as Shields readily comments on potentially sensitive topics. In a 1989 interview conducted by Eleanor Wachtel, Shields speaks quite candidly about her slow feminist awakening. Unlike evidence from interviews with Jane Urquhart in which, as I discuss at the beginning of my previous chapter, feminism is a largely absent topic, Shields willingly refers to herself as a feminist. But, as with the late twentieth-century moment of Urquhart's resistance, for Shields, this easy inclination to be associated with feminism could be a function of timing. Shields' early writing and interviews took place before public criticism about second-wave feminism rose to become the palpable backlash Susan Faludi depicts in her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women.*

Shields connects her first conscious forays into feminist thinking with reading. When returning to Canada in 1964, after living overseas for several years, Shields traveled from England by ship. As she comments to Wachtel, those were "the days when people traveled by boat" (20), and it was during that sea voyage that Shields read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's work prompted Shields to think of the books she had read and about the women she read about: "the women in the fiction I read were nothing like the women I knew . . . [not] as intelligent . . . [not] as kind" (20). Shields recalls here that, while in England, she was a member of "Great Books," a neighbourhood discussion group made up of young mothers who "were enormously supportive of each other" and gathered together in their kitchens to discuss what they read. This experience instilled in Shields a lasting dislike of disparaging attitudes towards women and "coffee clatches" (Wachtel 20). Shields' description of her "Great Books" gatherings sounds very much like a consciousness-raising group. Acknowledged as a "characteristic second-wave feminist strategy" (Heywood 66-7), consciousness-raising gained prominence in the 1960s when groups of women met to share personal information about their lives with each other, thus coming to understand how established social and cultural conventions governed their lives and contributed to their unrest. As a second-wave feminist activity, the practice of consciousness-raising faded during the 1980s; however, in North American today, its spirit, albeit much less feminist, still exists in the form of contemporary book clubs where women meet to discuss a book they have all read.[8] Shields' reflection about her 1964 gatherings in England acknowledges both the consciousness-raising aspect of these gatherings and her participation in them.

Despite this revelation, Shields was slow to view herself as a feminist. Even after returning to university in 1969 to earn a Master's Degree in Canadian Literature, she says that she did not associate herself with the women's movement: "I would never have thought that I was a feminist in those days" (25). In response to Wachtel's subsequent question about how she did become a feminist, Shields recalls that it was a gradual awareness that did not come from feminist action groups. Yet, when explaining how she sees the origins of her feminism, Shields goes back to *The Feminine Mystique*:

---

[8] The current proliferation of women's book clubs in middle-class North American society has no doubt been strongly influenced by the widespread prominence of the televised book club on Oprah Winfrey's popular talk show.

> Reading Betty Friedan made an enormous difference to me. I went to hear her speak . . . There were things about her I didn't like, but everything she said seemed right, at that time anyway. . . . I guess I've always been interested in the lives of women. I've never doubted that the lives of women lacked value. But I see books demeaned because they deal with the material of women's lives. (26)

When Shields says that she did not doubt that the "lives of women lacked value," she refers to prevalent social perceptions of conventional women's lives as not culturally productive or inherently uninteresting. This passage raises two distinct, disparate points: first, it challenges the notion that the lives conventional middle-class women traditionally lead have little social and artistic worth; and second, Shields' comments here illustrate the defining power of memory: only in retrospect can Shields return to the beginning of her feminist awareness.

The significance of Shields' memory work is that the moment she pinpoints as the beginning of her feminist thinking is characterized not by any of the consciousness-raising activities so often associated with early second-wave feminism, but by the introspective activity of reading a book. Later in the same interview, Shields comments again that her feminist awareness was slow to develop:

> When you [Wachtel] were asking me, when did I become a feminist, I can't even remember, I was so slowly waking up. I think I'm too late, I'm one of those women in between. . . . Too late to be an old-style woman and . . . too late to be a new-style woman (37-38).

Shields' memory of her late feminist awakening is strikingly similar to the life situations of many of her novels' female characters, who are, like Shields, "women in between." While they become the central focus of Shields' fiction, they do not, however, overwhelm the narratives because Shields sets them in their populated lives and puts them in dialogue with not only those around them, but also their social and cultural environments. In these polyphonic stories, Shields, consistent with her acknowledged generosity and usually upbeat manner, depicts their narrative conflicts as located in an "extraordinary goodness" (Wachtel 10) that she sees as a foundation for North American middle-class life. In novels that move with ease across the barriers and borders that frame their characters' lives, Shields simultaneously examines the cultural contexts of those limits.

Later interviews show that Shields, despite her amiability, was not reluctant to take issue with assessments of her work and its impact on her family life. In a chat with Donna Krolik Hollenberg nine years after her conversation with Wachtel, Shields remembers that a previous interviewer once asked what her choice would be if she had to choose between her family and her writing. Ignoring the gendered assumptions in a question that would likely not be asked of a male writer, Shields' answer recognizes her own positive family situation, and simultaneously anticipates expected responses and criticisms. Pointing to her family's support, Shields calls the question "ludicrous, since [she didn't] have to make that choice" (343). Nevertheless, she does acknowledge the difficulties that writers who are also mothers often have in finding time and space for their work amid domestic duties: "a secure, loving family has sustained me and given me perspective, even though I know how family life consumes and fractures time" (343). Dealing in advance with a perhaps inevitable feminist criticism about the traditional life situations of her female characters, Shields continues almost defiantly with the following observation:

> I admire constraint and don't for a minute consider it a form of surrender. It is really a kind of tact, an emotional and artistic economy that isolates, identifies, and focuses our work and our moral lives. We really don't have to do everything, just because everything is possible; I came to this happy conclusion in the seventies when I saw so many women leaving their marriages in search of "freedom." I'm not sure anyone then, or now, can define freedom, but the definition can be broadened to included ties of loyalty and love. (344)

Ironically situating freedom as a binding "tie," Shields' words imply not only a defense of traditional femininity that "admires constraint," but also a disapproving critique of the impact of second-wave feminism on the conventional family. For Shields the lure of individual freedom to do "everything" is but superficial glitter that seduces committed women to betray their promises. Here, Shields offers a brief yet intriguing glimpse into the conflicted position many women who had already made obligations to marriage and motherhood found themselves in as the second women's movement of the twentieth century came to prominence during her early writing years.

Shields' early novels came into being in the midst of the above contemplation about whether women who experience consciousness-raising about the conditions of their lives should abandon their prior choices to set out on a free path to experience everything their domestic lives cannot offer. As this discussion demonstrates, the answer Shields provides for this dilemma in her novels is in the negative. Nevertheless, although ordinary women's lives and a "concentration on (and upholding of) marriage and family life" (Hammill 2002, 143) are the mainstay of Shields' stories, to understand her fiction only for its emphasis on the traditional domestic sphere would be unfairly limiting to a body of work that offers many productive avenues of investigation. As Hollenberg notes, Shields writes about people, not all of them women, "whose lives reflect the social upheaval of the women's movement" (339).

Acknowledging that social history can have a profound impact on countless individual life trajectories, Shields talks to Hollenberg about her 1997 novel, *Larry's Party*, noting that she wrote it because she "was curious about how men's lives have changed in response to the new gender thinking" (342). On one hand, one type of feminist critique could observe that this is a particularly "womanly" motivation: to be concerned about how the traditionally dominant partners in heterosexual relationships may be having difficulties with "the new comportments [they] have to learn, new definitions to be absorbed, compromises to reflect on" (342). On the other hand, another approach recognizes, from both her observations about *Larry's Party* and her willingness to write in a male first-person voice, that Shields does not read feminism as relevant only to women.

Similar to Urquhart's body of work, Shields' novels reflect her interest in history, or more accurately, in the writing of history. While rooted in conventional western society, Shields' historical curiosity does have a feminist impetus; Shields says that she examines history from a "who holds the pen" perspective: "who gets to write it, and what it's for" (Hollenberg 341). Observing that no firm line exists between history and fiction, Shields comments that "history is a branch of fiction, a series of selection and personal commentary," and goes on to say that "we [women] know better now than to believe what we are told" (341). While these comments indicate her awareness of how deeply embedded gendered imbalances are in the history of contemporary western society, they do not necessarily situate her as a feminist writer. Nevertheless, they do locate Shields as an artist who writes from a considered consciousness about issues that are both feminine and feminist.

Whether feminine or feminist, the mothers in Shields' novels read. They also write. Because her characters engage in these activities, Shields' fiction often includes explorations into writerly tools and conventions. Description and dialogue alike in her books demonstrate how language at once communicates across barriers but creates yet more barriers to effective knowing and productive communication. The gaps that cannot be captured by language indicate, as Sarah Gamble says, those "experiences or concepts incapable of ever being contained within a conventional narrative framework" (*Carol Shields* 45). Along with exploring the limitations of language, Shields also writes about writers themselves, word artists who struggle with the very basic units of their medium to find those expressions with the exactly right timbre and hue for the topic at hand just as painters struggle to find the specific shades they need for their visual narratives. Shields' observations about the act of writing do not stop with the difficulties of finding the best way to express the unexpressable in an androcentric language. In the images she creates with words, Shields contemplates how writing depicts a life (or lives), and infuses her characters with an effective believability that makes them immediately available to her readers.

As a writer of both fiction and biography, Shields knows the impact of the lived experience on the writer's page. Of the "exceedingly WASP suburb of Chicago" where she grew up, Shields says it was "like living in a plastic bag" (Wachtel 5), an unreal but, as she says, very safe environment that precluded any questioning of a distorted world and contributed to the length of her feminist awakening. Nevertheless, despite its apparent safety, coming out of this conventional, "prudent" – to use her own word – upbringing, Shields also well knew the at-times stifling claustrophobia surrounding the "plastic bag" container that was mid-twentieth-century American suburbia (Eden 4). Passed over in college for an English Department award because of her gender (Eden 5),[9] Shields very personally experienced the limitations placed on women's opportunities by normative patriarchal standards. Nevertheless, she chose a conventional path, marrying right after college, eventually having five children, and managing her domestic duties while developing her writing skills in moments of stolen time, much as other women writers of similar time and place, such as Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood have described.[10] Shields' talent as a writer gives her work a valuable readability and heightens its appeal to a wide readership. However, rather than her position as a revered Canadian novelist, I see Shields' formative upbringing in a prominently white, well-to-do American suburb of a prominent American city as the foundation of her liberal feminism and her cultural conditioning that holds the image of the appropriately good mother as unassailable. Shields' childhood in the "plastic bag" of Oak Park, Illinois never left her.

---

[9] This event occurred while Shields attended Hanover College in Indiana is the 1950s. According to Eden, although Shields had earned the John Livingston Lowers Award for being the outstanding English major in the department, Hanover's English Department awarded the prize to "the next-highest ranking student because he was a man and the award would help him in his career" (5).

In a short reflective article included in the special *Prairie Fire* issue, one of Shields' daughters, Anne Giardini, responds to the many times she has been asked how her mother could find time to write in her busy domestic life:

> [My mother] raised five children, managed a large house and always worked or studied (or both) part time. She made all the meals, did all the laundry, painted the walls and sanded and refinished old furniture. She made Halloween costumes, cookies, pies, and birthday cakes, She organized dinner parties often and went to parties and plays. . . . She had few hours of her own. Having grown up with her example, I have never had patience for people who sigh that they, too, would write if only they had time. (10-11)

While this account is likely to produce feelings of either inadequacy or anger, or both, in women who have tried to manage all these tasks without the added complication of writing creatively on the side, Giardini's account shows that Shields lived her life according to prevalent social expectations of what it means to be a "good mother."

This "good mother" has intrinsic links to the maternal feminism that framed the first-wave's goal of attaining the right to vote for women, a feminism that "allow[ed] women of the right class and ethnicity a substantial [social] role" that worked towards a "reconstituted family, with a partially public mother and a partially domesticated father" (Valverde *Age of Light*, 32-3). As her daughter's memory illustrates, for Shields, the goodness associated with motherhood is an issue that is conventionally feminine in practice, but feminist in the agency and cultural contexts of her writing production.

---

[10] I expand on this point and provide sources in the following chapter on Laurence's work.

In Shields' fiction, the commentary on female goodness does not appear as a prominent topic until her last novel, *Unless*, when protagonist Reta Winter's nineteen-year-old daughter suddenly abandons behaviour typical of a well-raised young woman, and begins a silent begging vigil on a downtown Toronto street corner wearing a sign around her neck that says "Goodness" (11-12). As it progresses, *Unless* offers an intricate deconstruction of goodness that impacts every facet of Reta's life. *Unless*, however, is not the beginning of Shields' exploration into the connection between women and goodness. Shades of how appropriate good behaviour shape all her female characters' lives are found in virtually all Shields' fiction.

Long a characteristic of appropriate femininity and a fundamental component of institutional motherhood, goodness predates the early twentieth century's maternal feminism and is deeply embedded in the history of contemporary western society. Today, simply defining "motherhood" invokes the word "goodness." *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* offers the following as one of its definitions of motherhood: "having an inherent goodness or justness that is obvious or cannot be disputed." In North America, investment in the notion of the "good mother" moves across many socially constructed categories of identity; however, its image has a popular culture history of being associated with white, middle-class, women in conventional lifestyles.[11]

Despite its aura as the "natural" instinctive purpose of this kind of woman's life, "the concept of an instinctive mother love did not exist in the Western world prior to the eighteenth century" (Ladd-Taylor 6). Exhibiting behavioural conflicts inconsistent with notions of "good mothers" puts other women in the middle of, as Lauri Umansky writes, a cultural impossibility: "although the role of the mother had been riddled with post-Freudian angst, so that it was nearly impossible to be considered a *good* mother, the dictate to "'go forth and mother' remained in place" (italics not mine, 20). Up until second-wave feminism, the image of a good mother depicted that she be nothing else; a woman became a mother and stayed a mother: any ambitions beyond that should only be to become a grandmother. As Umansky's comment suggests, with its reference to the transition of time from a Freudian to a post-Freudian age, the association between goodness and women is a relatively recent construct that has been politically entrenched in the ideological origins of western society.

Exploring the origins of this binding connection between goodness and mothers is an endeavour that often results in unique, personally motivated writing. In a well-known article called "Stabat Mater," first published in 1977, Julia Kristeva uses a unique writing style that features critical investigation intersected by sections of what seem to be spontaneous thought fragments to delve into the realm of maternity she had herself recently experienced. By placing those fragments, such as "broken up visions, metaphors of the invisible" (162) next to her reflections about what living in a maternal body is like.

---

[11] In particular, I am thinking here of well-known television images from the 1950s such as the characters of June Cleaver and Betty Anderson in *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*.

for a contemporary woman, Kristeva deftly invokes a myriad of historical constructions that float around motherhood myths. While Adrienne Rich explains her American experience of motherhood in *Of Woman Born*, the European Kristeva searches for a more mythic discourse about motherhood. She notes: "motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory . . . it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the relationship that binds us to her" (161). By situating representations of motherhood as an "idealized archaic" relationship, both Rich and Kristeva reposition mainstream understandings of motherhood as longstanding, historical, and socially constructed with definitive ideological purposes rather than "naturally female" conditions.

As her title, "Stabat Mater" implies,[12] Kristeva's unusual exploration spends much of its content considering the influence of the Virgin Mary on contemporary notions of motherhood. In her interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Shields speaks of the curiosity she felt about what she calls "the Cult of the Virgin" (42) around the time she was working on what would become her sixth novel, *The Republic of Love*. Shields' outside interest resonates in the novel's subtext: "the Cult of the Virgin" appears in the narrative, incorporated into an academic paper, "Mermaids: A Feminist Perspective" (96), that feminist scholar Fay McLeod presents at a conference. In this fictional analysis, Fay situates the single-tailed mermaid as "an Eve figure overlaid with the cult of the Virgin, a sealed vessel enclosing either sexual temptation or sexual virtue, or some paradoxical and potent mixture of the two" (97). Here, Shields depicts the confinement of women (sealed vessels) as not only "paradoxical" but also inevitably linked, through Eve and the Virgin Mary, to Christianity.

---

[12] Toril Moi, editor of *The Kristeva Reader*, notes that Kristeva's title comes from a Latin hymn about the Virgin Mary's grief at the crucifixion of her son (160).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Mary is a key role model for women, but it was not until several hundred years after Jesus' death that the Catholic church proclaimed her to be the "Mother of God" and a "perpetual virgin" (Holland 98-99). Kristeva notes that, centuries later, Christian societies around the world still hold that "the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood" (161). Recognizing the discordant clash between the second-wave feminist movement and this long-absorbed rendition of motherhood, Kristeva advises that emerging from the restrictions of "an overabundance of discourse" (177) requires a serious contemplation that allows room "to listen, more carefully than ever, to what mothers are saying today, through their economic difficulties and, beyond the guilt that a too existentialist feminism handed down" (179).

Women writers have not been the only ones to investigate "the cult of Mary" and its connection to current attitudes about motherhood. In the intriguing investigation that is *Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice*, Jack Holland writes that "as a role model for women, Mary set contradictory (if not downright impossible) standards for them to meet – representing as she did the apotheosis of passivity, obedience, motherhood, and virginity" (104). Holland's book is ambitious in scope, moving from myth and ancient Rome, through the rise of Christianity and the Middle Ages, and into Victorianism and modernity in less than three hundred pages, reaching a sweeping conclusion that "all the world's religions, and the world's most renowned philosophers, have regarded women with contempt and a suspicion that sometimes amounted to paranoia" (269).[13] My sense is that Shields would want to deny Holland's wide-ranging edict, but that her narrative instincts would find a use for his passion, especially in the dedication to his mother, grandmother, aunt, and sisters that opens his book.

As a specific concept, goodness begins to emerge significantly in Shields' penultimate novel, *Larry's Party*. Shields provides her protagonist, Larry Weller, with a second wife, Beth Prior, who happens to be a graduate student working on a thesis about women saints. Shields' narration elaborates in detail about the real focus of this thesis in progress:

> Goodness is what she's really in search of, especially feminine goodness, that baffling contradiction. Why, in the centuries when women were denied, ignored, oppressed, and tortured, did they continue to fashion themselves into vessels of virtue? How, considering their ignorance and non-status, was it possible for them to get even a rudimentary purchase on the continuum of goodness and evil, to reflect on its meaning and to direct themselves so purely, so persistently, toward moral perfection? (121-2)

Significantly, Shields writes the second sentence in this passage in the passive voice, and thus avoids assigning direct responsibility to the many patriarchal social restrictions constructed to perpetuate women's subordination. Although Shields' intellectual curiosity is here fully activated towards its analysis of goodness, she does not, possibly for the sake of an always optimistic tone, look for agents other than women themselves to examine the socially constructed parameter of goodness: instead, the question she poses, "why . . . did they continue to fashion themselves" critiques the women, not the social order. Again invoking the memory of maternal feminism, Shields even nods towards an essentialism at work in the human female: perhaps, asks Beth in her dissertation process, "women simply long to be good for the sake of goodness; maybe they are predisposed by evolutionary mapping to commit acts of charity so that a race commanded by men might not implode" (122). The narrative function of this scenario establishes a potential for conflict between Larry and his new wife; however, the thematic function is to allow Shields' interest in exploring women and goodness to take more prominence in *Larry's Party* than it had in her previous works. Looking back to her earlier novels provides early evidence of its presence, while looking into her two subsequent novels reveals that Shields was never quite able to reconcile female goodness into her representations of domestic optimism.

---

[13] Although highly readable, Holland's argument is characterized more by passion than in-depth critical research. For a more rigorous analysis of how misogyny is reflected in work by the "renowned philosophers" Holland refers to, see *Misogyny in the Western Philosophical Tradition: A Reader*, edited by Beverley Clark (published in New York by Routledge, 1999).

Shields' first two novels, *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, play out along the lines of Shields' own life: in conventional narrative fashion, with largely linear structures and familiar novelistic layouts. *Small Ceremonies*' protagonist Judith Gill, a biographer, writes about the life of Canadian pioneer poet Susanna Moodie. Like Shields herself, Judith aspires to write in different genres and, along with the Moodie biography, is working diligently on her first novel. Setting out on her first foray into fiction, Judith writes carefully, "observing all the conventions as [she] understood them," a narrative exercise that gives her story a promising start; however, she soon runs into difficulties as she develops a "complete inability to manufacture situations" (69). The parallels between

Judith's aspirations and Shields' own situation as a beginning novelist are obvious. Yet by creating a character very similar to herself, Shields makes room for much commentary about biography as a genre, "the only story we've got" (Wachtel 28), and for depictions of the creative process as often painful and laboured. In *Small Ceremonies*, "the fictionalizing process that is inherent in the writing of lives" (Hammill 1999, 80) comes to the fore as Shields peppers her narration with writerly thoughts, such as "the task of the biographer is to enlarge on available data" (35), that often strike writers during the generative process. This novel begins Shields' extended novelistic experimentation into the productive grey areas between reality and fiction.

One narrative technique Shields experiments with and examines closely in *Small Ceremonies* is irony. As Judith struggles to portray Susanna Moodie's life with diligent accuracy in her biography, Shields simultaneously inserts observations about irony's place and purpose in Judith's thoughts:

> Irony, it seems to me, is a curious quality, a sour pleasure. Observation which is acid-edged with knowledge. A double vision which allows pain to exist on the reverse side of pleasure. Neither vice nor virtue, it annihilated the dichotomy of [Moodie's] existence. Smoothed out the contradictions. Forstalled [sic] ennui and permitted survival. An anesthetic for the frontier, but at the same time a drug to dull exhilaration. (123)

For both protagonist and author, irony[14] becomes the self-reflexive method they often use to manage both the pain of disappointment and the pleasure of elation: in *Small Ceremonies*, irony is not only a writer's tool or an orator's strategy, but also a survival tactic, a means of making sense out of the inner conflicts that plague even the most outwardly contented lives. While Moodie's life in Canada may not have been a contented one,[15] her fictional biographer, via the pen of her former literary critic, comes to the conclusion that it was "her sense of irony that kept her afloat when everything else failed" (123-4). This contemplation about how Moodie used irony to keep her going through difficult times leads Judith to reflect about how she uses irony in her life as a "balancing act between humour and desperation" (124). For Shields, Judith's digression about irony offers a narrative opportunity to infuse her story with observations about how irony mediates meaning, at times becomes the means to negotiate the gaps between meaning and understanding, and at others a female survival technique.

Unlike the creative difficulties Judith experiences in *Small Ceremonies*, Shields is completely comfortable manufacturing the mundane details of her characters' everyday lives, as she demonstrates in a silent scene where the Gill family, including Judith's daughter Meredith and husband Martin, arrives at the front door of a party house:

> Meredith and I bend together as though at a signal and exchange our boots for our shoes, balancing awkwardly on each foot in turn. Only when we are standing in our fragile sandals does Martin lift

---

[14] Irony, like feminism, has a complicated critical history. For a brief foray through irony's evolution, from its classical invocation as a sub-category of allegory to the "virtual silence" of poststructuralism on the power of irony, see Irena R. Makaryk's *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 572-3.

[15] Faye Hammill writes about the different perspective Shields has on Moodie as compared to that of Margaret Atwood: "Atwood outlines . . . [Moodie's] perception of the wilderness as hostile and her efforts to love Canada despite her revulsion at so many aspects of her life there. Shields . . . speaks of Moodie's Victorian gentility and her cherished English identity and Romantic literary ideals" (1999, 68).

the knocker. (75)

These seemingly unimportant details blend in with other more significant ones as the party progresses. Moving around the room, Judith meets a columnist who "writes a quirky bittersweet saga of motherhood . . . in which she describes the hilarity of babyshit on the walls" (76-77). This vivid image may be quirky and bittersweet for some, but far less compelling for others so Shields leaves this conversation quickly, letting her narrative drift around the room at random as if eavesdropping on the guests. The various conversational fragments run the gamut of regular cocktail party chit chat and the scene plays out like a cinematic montage. The topics the guests talk about spring directly from the 1970s Canadian socio-political landscape: from cultural commentary, "of course Canadian culture has to be protected"; to gendered observations rooted in essentialism, "of course women have come a long way, but don't think for a moment that one or two women in Parliament are going to change a damn thing [because] sex is built-in like bones and teeth"; through to class injustices, "the fisherman who caught this fish is probably sitting down to pork and beans right now" (78).

From public outings like the above party scene, through tedious routines and private moments of despair for her family's future, Shields ensures that Judith determinedly "will[s] herself into happiness" as she climbs into bed each night (124), a happiness that must prevail over any lurking worries ready to disturb her upcoming sleep. The happiness Judith seeks is elusive, shaped by absorbed social conditioning, and she unthinkingly searches her inner self for evidence of requisite female goodness. At one point, as she watches her family in their evening activities, Judith's unspoken thoughts reveal that she questions herself for any perceived lapses, rather than the ideology that shapes her world:

> Husband, children, they are not so much witnessed as perceived, flat leaves which grow absently from a stalk in my head, each fitting into the next, all curving edges perfect. So far, so far. It seems they require someone, me, to watch them; otherwise they would float apart and disintegrate.
>
> I watch them. They are as happy as can be expected. What is the matter with me, I wonder. Why am I always the one who watches? (22)

Judith sees her family as fitting the expected portrait, separate but connected components that come from her "stalk," but components that, without her, would "disintegrate" into floating islands. She sees her motherly role, the one who watches, as what prevents that potential disintegration, yet her poignant question suggests suppressed yearnings to be free of the "watching" duties. Her deeply rooted notions of maternal responsibility guide her initial question: Judith looks first to herself for any perceived lapse. Only then, can she allow herself to think about the wider implications of her unease, as her first query, "what is the matter with me" shifts to the more challenging "why."

That *Small Ceremonies* is Shields' first novel shows. Although its structure has a certain appeal in that the nine chapters play out the length of the narrative's secret pregnancy, its flow is linear, the plot predictable, the character interactions at times stilted and contrived. However, *Small Ceremonies* does mark the beginning of Shields' novelistic exploration into what it means to be a writer, into what fiction is, and into how writing and the research it requires reflect both imagined and lived lives. Shields' novels contain much evidence of authorial self-reflexivity, or what Burkhard Niederhoff refers to, in relation to the activities of both Shields and many of her characters, as "the connections and echoes between . . . the researched life and the life of the researcher" (71).

Similar to Margaret Laurence's decision to write sister novels, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers*,[16] Shields chose to write a second novel that is connected to her first by family ties. Like *Small Ceremonies*, *The Box Garden*'s story unfolds in the first person voice of a female protagonist, Judith Gill's sister, Charleen Forrest. Unlike Laurence, whose inner voice compelled her to tell the stories of Rachel Cameron and Stacey McAindra before she continued with other writing, for Shields, the decision to produce sister novels was one she would regret. In an interview with Marjorie Anderson, Shields says of *The Box Garden*:

> I wrote about a kidnapping and I was very sorry I did that. It is one book I would recall if I could. What do I know about kidnappings and police? I felt I did it very flimsily, and I don't know why I did it. . . . I am interested in people's perversions and dishonesties to a certain extent and how they work those out, but violence has not been a part of my experience and I am far too fond of my characters to want to do them violence. (144)

Shields clearly indicates here that her comfort level as a storyteller comes from what she is familiar with: she writes creatively and imaginatively about what she knows. Shields is probably being a little hard on herself in that *The Box Garden* is not a bad novel, but the product of a developing writer.

---

[16] I discuss both these Laurence novels at length in Chapter Three.

The Box Garden, like *Small Ceremonies*, has a small mystery at its narrative core, indicative of a trend in Shields' writing that will continue to develop with positive results. Every Shields novel has a little mystery in it: in *Happenstance: The Wife's Story*, Brenda Bowman's coat strangely goes missing while she is at her quilting conference; in *The Republic of Love*, Fay MacLeod receives an anonymous wedding gift of a small glass bottle filled with urine (329); in *Swann*, the mystery of Mary Swann's missing poetry is the central context of the story. Shields sometimes leaves a little portion of each novel's mystery unsolved, much like the unconnected, unresolved details of everyday life that vanish into the ether of our ancestry, unanswered questions that eventually dissipate into the past, eternal queries no longer asked with answers no longer required.

Questions of family togetherness, however, are always resolved in a Shields novel. As the narrative of *The Box Garden* comes to a close, Shields creates a scene she returns to often near the ends of her novels: "the whole house, in fact, is asleep" (193). In *Larry's Party*, a novel Dee Goertz says is a search for connectedness, "the human quest for meaning and pattern in the universe" (231), protagonist Larry Weller, at the end of both his party and his story, alternates between sleeping and waking, "dreaming, or perhaps not dreaming, of the comforts offered in this world" (336.) While both parts of *Happenstance* come to a close with Jack and Brenda Bowman happily reuniting at the airport after Brenda's weeklong absence, the ending of *Happenstance: The Wife's Story*, takes this narrative out on a familiar Shields' note of contentment: "in the minutes before true sleep comes, [Brenda] lets go, and drifts away on her own" (197). In a symmetrical framing style, the beginning of Brenda's story happens at the other end of the day, as she "glides" into her regular morning routine, sailing down the "wide oak stairs" in classic Scarlett O'Hara style. Occasionally, Shields shifts a novel's ending from nighttime comfort to a united, contented family gathered for a special event. Faye Hammill argues that *The Republic of Love* (365) is a novel which takes up the topic of love "ironically, seriously, mockingly, reverently, conventionally, and eccentrically" (*Carol Shields* 61), ends with a description of a mermaid's uplifted arm, "symboliz[ing] a deep longing for completion, the wish for rapturous union, a hunger for the food of love" (366).

Only in the endings for *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries* does Shields depart from the resolved, intact family image. In *Swann*, a novel that "is centred wholly upon the question of literary origins and textual authority" (Gamble 52), Shields splits her story into five sections, each one stylistically separate. The first four sections have different narrators, a strategy that Heidi Hansson says prevents readers from becoming too involved with any one character, and is an "indication that different versions of 'truth' will be juxtaposed" (357). *Swann*'s multiple narrators complicate its juxtaposition of truths, but Shields adds to that complication when she shifts to an entirely different genre in the final of *Swann*'s five sections, wrapping up this mystery novel with a film script featuring the novel's five main characters, as well as its eponymous character, deceased poet Mary Swann. The self-reflexive subtext, as Shields writes in the last section, concerns itself with "the more subtle thefts and acts of cannibalism that tempt and mystify the main characters" (293). Nevertheless, *Swann* ends in an emotional place similar to the endings of Shields' other novels: in a note to the film's imagined director, she stipulates that “the faces of the actors have been subtly transformed . . . each of them has, for the moment at least, transcended personal concerns” (396).

Personal concerns make up the entirety of Shields’ next novel, *The Stone Diaries*, but they are specific concerns that, as Winifred Mellor writes, focus “attention to the way women are silenced by the restrictive imposition of the modes of certain genres” (97). In a narrative that begins with both a death and a birth, Daisy Goodwill’s, and ends with a death, Daisy Goodwill Flett’s, the sleep Daisy falls into at the end is an eternal one: “her final posture, then, is Grecian. Quiet. Timeless. Classic. She has always suspected she had this potential” (359). As Daisy falls into eternal silence, the description of her death is one consistent not only with that of a “good mother” (quiet, timeless, classic), but also with her last name: Goodwill.

Shields makes a gesture of good will to the conventions of traditional autobiography in that she names the novel’s ten chapters according to the expected contents of a woman’s autobiography: “Birth,” “Childhood,” “Marriage,” “Love,” “Motherhood,” “Work,” “Sorrow,” “Ease,” “Illness and Decline,” and “Death.” However, Shields plants ironic ideological suggestions in those chapter titles, in that marriage is separate from love, and work is different from motherhood. Furthermore, the contents of each chapter are often not what the chapter title indicates: for example, the “Work” chapter consists entirely of letters, most of which are about the recent death of Daisy’s husband, Barker. In the chapter titled “Motherhood,” Daisy has already been a mother for a number of years, a job she obviously takes very seriously: because she “deeply, fervently, sincerely desir[es] to be a good wife and mother . . . [she] reads every issue of *Good Housekeeping*” (185). The chapter’s overall sense is of Daisy moving away from herself. She begins referring to herself as "Mrs. Flett" rather than Daisy, and, reflective of the Goodwill name she gave up when she married, spends several pages considering "being good—what does being good mean in the context of the Flett family" (158). Although Daisy considers that question only in relation to her children, not herself, and needs much help to convey her entire story, *The Stone Diaries* is a complex representation of, as Chiara Briganti writes, "the impossible task of writing the life story of a woman who is always already elsewhere" (183), but is also indicative of what Lisa Johnson refers to as the "recognition of agency in women's storytelling" (202).

In *The Stone Diaries*, Shields fictionalizes autobiography from a feminist perspective and, as Wendy Roy writes, enters into "critical practice by engaging with feminist theories of life writing" (114). Awarded the Governor-General's Award for fiction in 1993, *The Stone Diaries* is an unusual combination of formats, an "extraordinary violation[] of storytelling conventions" (Weese 90), that includes black and white photographs of real people (from the Shields' family photo collections) portraying fictional people. Because *The Stone Diaries* disrupts the conventions of autobiography, it must be classified as "meta-autobiography" (Roy 115). Giving various definitions for autobiography, Roy refers to Linda Hutcheon's comment that "to write a life is to fictionalize it" (116). Connecting life-writing to the maternal condition, Roy observes that autobiography often happens when the autobiographer's mother is dead (116). *The Stone Diaries* consists largely of Daisy Goodwill Flett's fragmented attempts to narrate her life, a life that began with her mother's death, the details of which she cannot have known without both information from others and her imagined visions of the event. Roy goes on to argue that autobiographical attempts on the part of women writers are usually fragmented because their lives are made up of fragments of other's lives: their partners, their parents, their children (118).

Whether *The Stone Diaries* is meta-autobiography or "metafiction that makes a comment on life writing" (Roy 118), as fictional autobiography its narrative structure illustrates the tension between fiction, autobiography, and reality. Shields also writes to question the boundaries between autobiography, fiction and theory (Roy 118). Gaps found in all three genres provide available space for understanding the voids and gaps in conventional women's lives, in the lives of women such as Daisy Goodwill Flett. Shields' novels illustrate that these voids are effectively revealed in writing that does not isolate women's lives but thoroughly examines their relationships with the people who enter both their personal and public lives. The voices that narrate Daisy's story talk in, around, and over Daisy's own voice, while creating a space for the narration to make a generic intrusion: "biography, even autobiography, is full of systemic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams" (196).

Silence can be a hole or a systemic error as well, and autobiography can consist of silences as well as voices. The silences in autobiography stem from omitted parts of the whole life, the detritus that the other voices do not know, that the writer resists putting into words. Those dark, dubious moments that reflect badly on character, go against the nap of her story's finish, or put important on-going relationships in jeopardy usually do not make it to the page. Daisy revises parts of her story and fills in imagined details where her complete knowledge is not possible. Nevertheless, ultimately Daisy's revelations, facts and imagined details, become the whole of her tale; in this way, Shields shows how history – whether personal or public – is a construction, with multiple versions and perspectives. Thus, fiction's unreliable narrator becomes autobiography's equally unreliable truth advocate.

Because Daisy cannot tell all of her story herself, she lets others relate parts of her life. In this way, Shields allows the silences surrounding Daisy's own body and sexuality to prevail. While Daisy speculates about her parents' bodies and sexual activities, she avoids any in-depth contemplation of her own bodily self. This gap coincides with the omissions of sexuality and corporeal functions demanded by conventional perceptions of female goodness. When pressed by her children for details about the sexual act between a man and a woman, Daisy turns to an oft-used cliché: it is, she says uncomfortably, " a beautiful thing between a man and woman" (166), a standard reply given to inquisitive children that situates sanctioned sexual activity as always wonderful and desirable while providing no definitive information about sexuality and/or the sexual act whatsoever. This moment in *The Stone Diaries* resonates with a similar, non-fiction, moment in the writer's life. Shields' daughter, Anne Giardini, describes a similar scene with her mother in the role of Daisy: "when faced with my pre-adolescent demand to be told the facts of life in detail, she wrung her hands and said despairingly, 'don't you already know'" (8). Thus, the fiction that is *The Stone Diaries* is informed by the novelist's potential (unwritten) autobiography, which in turn requires the fictionalization of fragments of lived reality.

For many mothers in postmodern, postfeminist, postmillennial, twenty-first century North America, lived reality is still very much connected to goodness. As Shields establishes protagonist Reta Winters' situation in her last novel, *Unless*, she builds into Reta's narrative an interrogation of the word "goodness." Leading up to the moment when she describes her teenage daughter, Norah, silently begging at downtown Toronto street corner, wearing a sign around her neck that bears the word "goodness" in block letters, Reta remembers that same daughter as "a good, docile baby" who became "a good, obedient girl" (11) who grew into an adolescent who "embodies invisibility and goodness" (12) and whose current "efflorescence of goodness" (13) is a distressing, incomprehensible, and painful dilemma for her mother. A kind of blossoming, "efflorescence" is a particularly fascinating word for Shields to use here, as it suggests a moment of disintegration, a transformation of materiality as a flower dehydrates into powder.

Reta's daughter has had a traumatic experience that caused her conventional student life to come to a sudden, debilitating halt. The rest of the novel hinges on unraveling the mystery of this traumatic event. Reta is a writer; therefore, to the consternation of some readers,[17] her way of handling the stress of her daughter's situation is to start work on a new novel, one that will be "about lost children, about goodness, and going home and being happy and trying to keep the poison of the printed page in perspective" (16). For a writer as upbeat and dedicated to her writing as Shields to link the written word with poison is unusual. Reta's narrative exploration of goodness creates the space for Shields to make some conclusive observations about this theme: "the tiny piping voice of goodness goes unheard, no matter how felt and composed it is"; "goodness, that biddable creature, cannot be depended upon"; and "goodness is respect that has been rarified and taken to a higher level. It has emptied itself of vengeance, which has no voice at all" (310). At the end of *Unless*, Norah Winters is recovered into the family fold, the mystery of her traumatic experience has been solved, and, Reta notes contentedly, "they are all sleeping, even Pet, sprawled on the kitchen floor, warm in his beautiful coat of fur" (321). Thus, in her last novel, Shields' narrative queries into happiness, goodness, and the lives of ordinary women come to an end in this everyday moment of night spreading over a sleeping family, and the injustices and mysteries of domestic life she has so carefully depicted in the narrative journeys that are her novels remain unresolved.

---

[17] This is an autobiographical observation that comes from a personal conversation I had with a friend of mine. She and I had eagerly awaited the publication of *Unless* and both read it at the same time. Shortly afterwards, we talked about it. I was enthusiastic, fascinated by what I saw as a work in which Shields voiced her strongest statement as a feminist writer. However, my friend did not like the book at all: she was appalled at the kind of mother Shields had created in Reta Winters, dismayed that a woman would let her daughter sit on a street corner while she sat at home and wrote a book.

With each subsequent book, Shields' narrative skills grow in both elegance and eloquence. In her later novels, Shields investigates the nature of narrative itself through very sophisticated innovations. In *The Stone Diaries*, she confidently uses a metafictional approach to illustrate that representations of either self or other in narrative are tenuous perspectives composed of elements of inadequate language systems, alienating cultural practices, and ingrained power imbalances. In addition, the metafictional emphasis in *The Stone Diaries* in particular and all Shields' novels in general, demonstrates that, while conveying concepts via narrative is a complex process filled with barriers, the same activity is also essential for establishing necessary connections between people and communities.

Even with their intricate commentaries about writing, the strongest thematic forces in Shields' narratives remain the valorization of conventional marriage, traditional motherhood, and domestic contentment. Shields writes as a liberal, even maternal, feminist who contemplates the social order she lives in, recognizes the limitations it places on her female characters' lives, but does not demand its reorganization. Shields' fictional mothers may struggle with the dilemmas of realizing their own ambitions within their marriage commitments, but they rarely, if ever, take issue with the ideals that constitute their notions of motherhood or the foundations of those ideals.

Yet, motherhood is not always a safe place for her maternal characters. In *The Stone Diaries*, Shields revisits Laurence's *The Stone Angel* in that she depicts death and motherhood as flowing one from the other: both *The Stone Angel*'s Hagar Shipley and *The Stone Diaries'* Daisy Goodwill are born at the moments of their mothers' deaths. Along with representations of the ordinary, the normative, and the conventional, Shields writes death into her narratives as the inevitable part of ordinary life it is. With her female characters all safely tied into the domesticity of the heterosexual family, death in a Shields' novel is almost matter-of-fact, thrown in with details of meal preparation, laundry, gardening, the ups and downs of married life, and parenthood. Shields' female characters do not seek to challenge the structures that support the conventional paradigms of their lives, but they do struggle to find ways to loosen the chafing binds of their normative lives. Shields is the upbeat linchpin that links Laurence and Urquhart: her novels have the optimistic tenor largely missing from Urquhart's oeuvre; they build on the feistiness and independence of Laurence's fledgling feminist mothers, and demonstrate that quietly transgressive acts can and do happen in the everyday and the ordinary.

Afterword to Chapter Two: Good Girl, Bad Girl, Good Mother, Bad Mother

As I write this, I realize that telling stories from a life is not a linear process. The movements in lived narrative go forwards and backwards. While things don't necessarily fall apart when the movement shifts, the centre does not always hold either. Life, like pie, comes in slices, but life's pie is often undercooked, runny. Slicing into to it doesn't result in neat, clean edges. Remove a piece and the rest of it spreads into the empty space, mixing with the juices running from the uncut portions. Life is a messy pie, and mine is no exception.

I have raised three children, but given birth to four. In the middle of Canada – Winnipeg, Manitoba where I was born and raised – the decade of the sixties was still an era when access to birth control, or even information about birth control, was comfortably available only to married women. For me and most of my high school friends, high school was a time and place of sexual anxiety and confusion. Encouragement to be curious about and experiment with sex was everywhere in the cultural revolution around us, but the restrictive social conventions of prior eras were still firmly in place in our community and family environments. Under the cover of conventionality, we could do anything we wanted, as long as no one but us knew about it. My mistake was not so much in having sex with my boyfriend, but in getting pregnant, thus providing visible evidence of my transgression.

From the summer of 1967 through to May 1968, I knew that I was a "bad" girl because, to use a common euphemism of the times, I was "in trouble." Being in that kind of trouble necessitated being invisible as long as the trouble was physically visible, so, as a pregnant eighteen-year-old, I was secreted away in that mid-century relic, a home for *unwed mothers. They were busy places in those days; a small city, Winnipeg had three of them. Fortunately for me, the one I served my time in was not dingy and dank, but clinically clean and tolerable in an institutional way.*

During my four months at the home, my outings were few. My boyfriend came to visit me once a week, borrowing a friend's car to take me out after dark, often to a drive-in so I didn't have to get out of the car. I rarely saw my parents, who did their best to ignore my shameful situation, even though I knew they felt it deeply. Family and friends were told that I was away on a trip.

I was pretty much in the dark about what was going to happen to my body. The home provided us with some instruction into the birthing process but that information was limited to pictures in medical books and pencil diagrams. For the most part, staff at the home were distantly pleasant. By contrast, the girls became instant friends, at least while living at the home. Once our babies were born, contact usually ceased, but in the home, our common situations brought immediate intimacy. Anything we learned about what was going to happen in our bodies usually came from each other.

The months dragged by, and winter slowly gave in to spring that year. Early in May, I finally went into labour late one night. The home sent me to the hospital in a cab, and I spent my time in the labour room alone. At first, the contractions weren't too bad, and I was fairly calm. Nurses came in to check on me, busy and officious. Eventually the pains became intense and closer together. Then everything started to happen at once, and suddenly a whole bunch of nurses hovered around, focused intently on my body, but somehow not on me. When they wheeled me to the delivery room, I grew frightened and began to cry. Very quickly, my crying turned into screams of panic. The nurses tried to *calm me down. When the doctor, a man I had never seen before, came in, he didn't speak to me, but I remember him asking the nurses what all the fuss was about. One nurse replied that I was "one of those unwed mothers from the home." Well, he said, "just put her out and let's get on with it." When I woke up, all was calm and I was on a stretcher. The doctor was nowhere in sight, but several nurses still bustled around me. What happened, I asked? You had a little boy, was the reply. Is he all right, I asked? Yes, he's fine, they said. Can I see him? No, that's not wise, they said.*

The next day, I went down to the nursery and found him. For the rest of my long stay—those were the days of a four- to five-day hospital stay for births—I would stand at the nursery window with my hands spread out on the glass, the tip of my nose touching the cold pane. At night, unable to sleep, I found myself again leaning against the glass. One night, to my surprise, the night nurse beckoned me in, and allowed me to hold my baby for a very few minutes. All I can remember about that brief moment was how warm he felt against me.

The day I was released from the hospital, I returned to the unwed mother's home, gave away all my maternity clothes to the other girls, packed my little white suitcase, and said good-bye to friends I would never see again. Back at my home with my family, I slipped quietly back into the daily routine. My sisters and brother were happy to see me, but clearly had been instructed to ask me no questions about my absence. I, in turn, offered no comment. I badly wanted to re-claim the "good" girl status I'd had in my family before my pregnancy.

Before I left the hospital, I quietly circumvented procedure and ordered, just as regular proud parents do, a picture of my baby to be mailed to my home address. I knew *that my parents would not have wanted me to have such a painful reminder, so I remained on watch for the postman after I returned home. Fortunately, the day it arrived, I was home alone and got to the mail before anyone else. After staring at his wide open eyes for a very long time, I put my two hospital identification bracelets in the envelope with the picture and placed that package in my night table drawer. As I write this, it's still there, in a different night table, but the same envelope.*

As for my extended family, once I returned, none of my aunts or uncles or anyone else inquired about my "trip"; in fact, not many people inquired about my absence at all, so explaining it was not difficult. It was as if my first pregnancy had not happened; I could, in fact, simply pretend it away. The silent approach to my situation fulfilled my parents' one condition for my re-acceptance as a "good" daughter, a condition my mother delivered to me by means of a terse whisper into my ear during her one visit up to the hospital: "your father wishes never to speak of this again." Except for the small black and white picture of a wide-eyed infant tucked deep into my night table drawer, the stretch marks on my breasts, and a strange emptiness that hovered uneasily in and around my thoughts, I could wrap up the entire previous year and stow it in my memory bank to be dulled by the events of a life that continued on as expected. I did what my social environment had conditioned me to do: I buried my feelings and went on with my life.

Five years later, now married and living far away from my family in Atlantic Canada, my new husband and I tried to settle into our version of marriage, determined as we were to figure out our own way of living a life together. And we did, in the beginning. We shared domestic roles, although I admit that might have been for practical reasons. I *couldn't cook, didn't really pay much attention to dust, and definitely planned to find self-satisfaction in work outside the home.*

After we had been married for about a year, I went to my doctor complaining of migraine headaches. He immediately recommended that I stop taking my birth control pills. When I inquired about other means of contraception, my doctor replied that it was about time I started having babies anyway. My husband and I complied with his direction, and, less than a year later, our beautiful first daughter arrived. The night she was born, after the pain had abated and the excitement of her birth was settling into a contented calm, I held her close and tried not to think about my lost child. Was he thriving? Was he loved? Did his adoptive mother feel about him the way I felt about this little bundle in my arms? The ache was palpable, but the only thing I could do was leave him in a safe inner place, that night table drawer somewhere in my psyche. That was the year I began sending what I would eventually call my "telepathic" messages to him: be well, my son, be safe, be happy.

The year after our daughter's birth was the best year of a difficult marriage. We lost ourselves in our magical child and a cozy warmth settled over our lives. Outside our oasis of calm, the turbulent sixties had given way to the tumultuous seventies, but, other than the orange shag rug that covered the floor of our tiny living room, no evidence of tumult could be seen in our home. About a year and a half after my daughter was born, halfway through my next pregnancy, we moved from the Maritimes to Edmonton.

I found out I was having twins after the first one was born. From the beginning, it was an unusual pregnancy. I was healthy enough, but this was unlike my other pregnancies, where I carried my babies fairly neatly and without too much discomfort.

This time, I was definitely uncomfortable and my stomach was huge. My doctor was unconcerned: I was just having a very large baby, at least ten pounds, he said, maybe more.

More than a little apprehensive about the impending birth, I finally made it to the end of a long difficult nine months: my husband was away for the last two months of my pregnancy, my almost two-year-old daughter was hard for my very awkward body to keep up with, and my massive girth ultimately restricted my wardrobe to one very large yellow tent. I began to dream that my monster child would tear me apart making its entrance into this world.

During the last month, every time I went for my weekly checkup, my doctor suggested he could induce labour. I resisted. Maybe out of fear, but also because, I didn't think I should need inducing. My first two came on their own; why shouldn't this one? A week before my due date, my doctor insisted that enough was enough; I was probably two or three weeks overdue, he said, it's time for you to be induced. I finally agreed. At that point, if he had said it's time for you to be decapitated, I would probably have agreed.

That night, after a relatively easy labour, the doctor held up my newborn for everyone in the delivery room to see: a lean six pounds of red-faced infant boy protested his arrival into a world of glaring lights and masks. Puzzled, my doctor took a second look into my birth canal: Nurse, he said, get another bassinet in here, we've got another one. Four minutes later, my youngest daughter was born, bum first, not breathing. Chaos ensued. My son was whisked away, medical staff appeared out of nowhere in droves, and I couldn't take my eyes off the tiny white body, as she received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from the doctor. Breathe, baby, breathe, I urged from my prone position too *far away. And breathe she did. Similar to her brother, she weighed in at just under six pounds.*

Much later that night, at my insistence—they thought I should be sleeping—the nurses brought my babies to me. Together we admired my two sleeping infants. Look at how their fingernails aren't quite formed, the nurses said. It was a good thing you resisted induction, because you weren't overdue at all, one nurse said. They're one week early, said another. My babies had needed those past three weeks to gain some weight, they said. These nurses looked at me with nodding admiration: mothers always know, they said. I didn't say anything. All I could think of was that I only had one crib at home, only one stroller, only one of everything: most of all, only one of me.

The next morning, my doctor came in, shaking his head. I don't know how I missed it, he said of his misdiagnosis. I must have given him the wrong information at the beginning, he said. Surely, there must be a history of twins in my family I didn't tell him about, he said. Silently, I was doing some thinking of my own: together my twins' birth weight added up to almost twelve pounds, and I'm not a very big person, so I didn't know how he missed it either. I said nothing.

As the days and weeks went by, I was deluged with questions about my inability to know what was going on in my own body from almost everyone in my life. What did it feel like, they said? Do you think you should have known, they said? Finally, I just pushed these queries into the distance; I had other things to think about. When I brought the babies home from the hospital, my two-year old admired them for the first few hours before tiring of their attention-demanding presence: "nice babies, mommy. Go home now," she said.

Home was more than a little frantic for a long while. My children's father was a pilot in Canada's armed forces. In the seventies, a well-known old "forces" proverb was that if the decision-makers in the military wanted their men (and they were virtually all men in those days) to have wives and children they would have provided them along with the rations and the uniforms.

When my little family tripled on that unforgettable night at Edmonton's Misericordia Hospital, this proverb still reflected where the family stood on the military priority list. My husband, away on a course in Ontario when the twins were born, was refused permission to come home until his course was finished. His squadron did send me flowers, which were pretty, but, really, I would rather have had my husband at home, or at least a second pair of hands for an afternoon or two. Nevertheless, somehow, after being released from the hospital, we – my babies, two-year old and I – got through each day and night. And, when finally he got home several weeks later, my husband was instantly besotted with all of his offspring.

Although he was away a lot, we sailed along fairly well for a while. We were lucky. My babies were healthy, and so were we. But as the next few years passed, our little family unit began to strain. My husband tried hard. When he was home, he was involved, up to his elbows in diapers and laundry. But, he wasn't home much, traveling all over the world. Despite the presents he brought me from every place he went, I started to resent his exotic life. Things grew tense between us. Jokes involving the word "divorce" were no longer funny. We tried not to worry. It'll pass, we said.

With mothering three infants my primary function, the outside world grew more distant and I became even more oblivious to it. But I could not be oblivious to a subtle *change taking place in my immediate sphere. Although I threw myself into mothering with gusto, and genuinely enjoyed the experience of that most intimate painful love, I became aware that the aura around me had changed. I realized that, when socializing with adult friends and family, conversation involving me always ended up being about the children. This situation wasn't entirely the fault of the people around me: at that point, I don't think I had much to say about anything that wasn't related somehow to raising children. Nevertheless, I felt this subtle change keenly. The tangible shift in others' perceptions of who I was did not match my perception of myself. While I relished nurturing and talking about the three little people who had taken over my life, I gradually became aware that "Myrl" had disappeared, replaced in everyone's eyes but my own by "Mom."*

As the first heady years of parenthood passed and I became more adept at being "Mom," I began to feel restless. Those around me often tried to soothe my itch: you're a good mother, they said. You're doing the most important job in the world, they said. I would accept their comments with a small smile and silence. As satisfying as mothering my babes was, in my inner self, I knew that something was missing from me: I was missing from me.

My marriage floundered. Gradually at first, and then with a huge upheaval. First I found a paying job, and then I moved the children and I out of our family home. My parents and siblings were horrified. Everyone in and around our lives urged my husband and I to go to marriage counseling, so we did. However, it soon became apparent to me that I was the one being counseled; for two-thirds of the counseling team—my husband and the counselor—I was the one who needed fixing. I saw that the purpose of the *counseling was not to help us reconcile our differences, but to rein in the aberrant female I had become. Much to the dismay of almost everyone around me, I decided that the split was final. Despite the sense that I was losing my "good" mother status, and slipping into "bad" mother territory because of my selfishness, I knew that I couldn't stay there. The marriage is finished, I said. And it was.*

Somehow, despite the deeply-rooted conditioning of a conventional middle-of-the-road, middle-of-Canada upbringing, I knew that if I wasn't fulfilled in my life, my children wouldn't be either. I can't say I was instinctively engaging in an unconscious form of feminist mothering, but I did know that if who I was disappeared into who I was supposed to be, part of my children's future potential would also disappear, or at least be harder for them to realize.

I didn't do it alone. I made new friends in my work, and met someone who soon became more than a friend. Two years after my divorce I re-married and settled in to make my new family structure work. My ex-husband and my new husband helped the situation immensely by becoming friends with each other. I am grateful that my children never had to decide whether to spend Christmas mornings with Mom or Dad. We just all spent them together and still do. To this day, that factor is key to the openness that characterizes our family relationships. It's also a key factor to my current maternal status: in my family, I'm a "good" mother again.

Chapter Three:

Feisty Mothers and Cranky Old Ladies:

Mothering in Margaret Laurence's Manawaka Works

I come to Margaret Laurence's Canadian fiction after investigating the works of Jane Urquhart and Carol Shields. From Urquhart, who wrote in the 1980s, 90s and continues writing in the twenty-first century, through Shields, who wrote in the late 1970s, 80s, 90s, publishing her last novel two years after the millennium change, I reach further back into the twentieth century to Laurence, who began writing in the 1950s, through the revolutionary 60s, publishing her last work of adult fiction in 1974. Reading these three writers in reverse chronological order lets me examine both the contexts and the times of their writing. The submerged feminism and pessimistic images of mothering under motherhood that Urquhart has and continues to produce in the latter part of the twentieth century reflects that period's ideological, and political, shift to the right in North America. My analysis of Shields' work occupies the very centre of my dissertation, allowing me to consider a body of work rooted in convention in that Shields' fiction conveys a second-wave liberal feminist optimism for social change that can be achieved through resistance contained within patriarchy's established social order, an optimism unfailing even as white middle-class feminism comes under heavy criticism from those excluded from its visions.

Saving Laurence for last has two benefits significant to my dissertation project: reading Laurence through Urquhart and Shields allows me to illustrate how feminism, mothering/motherhood, and self-writing are intimately, ultimately, connected. Moreover, coming to her work after Urquhart and Shields illustrates the originary foundations Laurence's Canadian fiction provides for writing mothers who stand on her work as they unleash their critical imaginary powers. Thus, with Urquhart and Shields in mind, the following discussion draws from the large body of Laurence criticism and biography produced from the 1960s to today[1]; provides an overview of what empowered and feminist mothering are, and examines the difference between them; takes up the transgressive qualities of Laurence's Canadian protagonists, women, mothers, and grandmothers; explores the connections Laurence herself makes in her memoir, *Dance on the Earth*; and, finally, examines the narrative implications of Laurence's own statement that her last work of fiction, *The Diviners*, is her "spiritual autobiography" (*Dance on the Earth* 208).

Almost from the outset of her career, Laurence drew keen interest and critical attention from casual readers and scholars alike. A wide range of friends, colleagues, critics, and scholars have produced biographical interpretations of Laurence's life. In what appears to be the first of many publications about this Canadian icon, *Margaret Laurence* (1969), Clara Thomas situates her initial look at Laurence as neither "assessment" nor biography, but as an attempt at "understanding and elucidation of all the restless, nervous, constantly shaping and patterning strands of Margaret Laurence's talent" (9). Thomas, a noted Canadian scholar and close Laurence friend, would return to Laurence's life and work many times over the years. Indeed, just six years later, Thomas published *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (1975), in which she examines

---

[1] The list of critical and biographical publications that I work through in the first part of this discussion is by no means a complete list. I selected works from each decade that represent the wide range of approaches Laurence's work has inspired, as well as works that have been useful in informing my approach to Laurence's fiction as a formative Canadian foray into depicting feminist mothering.

Laurence's Canadian fiction in context with her African work and argues that Laurence "belongs with the most gifted writers of the emergent nations, countries which, like Canada, must find and recognize their own cultures and their own voices" (Foreword). More comprehensive biographies followed after Laurence's death in 1987, reflecting both the completion of an accomplished artist's lived life and the social upheavals of the times in which she lived. Pointing directly to the influence of second-wave feminism, in 1997, James King published *The Life of Margaret Laurence*, a detail-filled biography in which King finds in Laurence's personal life "the very human story of a woman's struggle to find—and define—herself in a male-centred world" and notes "her incredible insecurities, . . . the many ways in which she punished herself, . . . the loneliness and isolation in which she dwelt nearly all her life" (xx).

Today, interest in Laurence's life shows no sign of abating. In 2003, former Laurence college mate and University of Michigan professor Lyall Powers published *Alien Heart*, another comprehensive biography that seeks to conform to the aims of its genre: as Powers writes, "the justification of a biography must be that it illuminates the achievements of its subject" (xviii). In his illumination of how the lived Laurence life influenced her artistic achievements, Powers denies "the facile reading *into* the fiction of a superficial 'confessional' or autobiographical feature" (xix), an endeavour he was no doubt well aware that Laurence herself would have abhorred. A subsequent work, Donez Xiques' *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*, focuses on Laurence's early years in a quest to find how a small-town Canadian prairie girl grew into an accomplished writer. Xiques chooses to answer that question by examining "the trajectory of Margaret Laurence's apprenticeship" (9). Finally, in a very recent publication, *Margaret Laurence:*

A Gift of Grace: A Spiritual Autobiography (2006), Noelle Broughton examines the development of Laurence's passions and inner life, concluding that Laurence achieved her literary greatness through her life's struggles and "because she mined her soul to answer her spirit's call" (191). For biographers, the approaches to Laurence's life and work are multiple as the above range demonstrates.

Whether biographer or scholar, literary critic or reviewer, all writers tend to treat both their subject's life and work with affection and respect. Nevertheless, touchy issues that Laurence does not deal with in her memoir remain part of her legacy. Laurence's struggles with alcohol are known through letters written by and about Laurence. As well, the impact of Laurence's alleged affair with Barbadian writer George Lamming on the breakup of her marriage to Jack Laurence has been the subject of speculation: James King chose to include Lamming's presence in Laurence's life in his biography, while Lyall Powers chose not to include it. Noelle Broughton took yet another approach, commenting on the differences between the King and Powers' versions (102). All, however, note that the difficulties in Laurence's life find their way into her fiction. For example, Powers argues that the sister protagonists of *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* "reflect the domestic situation (as [Laurence] saw it) in the Laurence household in the middle sixties and . . . anticipate the resolution of these problems—though not exactly as the two novels resolve them" (xx).

Reading biographically is not an approach that scholarly critics choose comfortably. While biographers can delve into the writer's life for explanation, critics must delve into the writer's produced works for recurring themes, relevant social contexts, and the cultural meanings created therein. Early criticism and evaluation of

Laurence often focuses on her work as a strong new voice for Canada: in the introduction to one of the first collections of essays on her work, titled simply *Margaret Laurence* (1977), W. H. New refers to Laurence as the writer who has most "mastered the rhythms and cadences of the Canadian speaking voice" (1), implying problematically that such a singular voice exists. New's collection features submissions from some very well-known writers including Clara Thomas, Robertson Davies, Barry Callaghan, George Woodcock, George Bowering, Marian Engel, and Margaret Laurence herself. In a short article called "Roots and Continuities," Laurence comments on the importance of the writer's subjectivity to the artistic product she or he produces: writing is, she says, "an attempt to understand one's background and one's past, even sometimes a more distant past which one has not personally experienced" (12).[2] A few pages later, in "Ten Years' Sentences," a contemplation about the publishing of her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, Laurence comments that "no freedom from the shackledom of ancestors can be total" (21). Thus, early criticism, and Laurence herself, examines her work for its representation of the Canadian now, the Canadian past, and the Canadian voice. This approach continues with subsequent critical collections such as *A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence*, in which editor George Woodcock situates Laurence's novels as "perhaps the most important fiction of any time" and Laurence as one of the "Canadian novelists who had served us as the providers of necessary myths" (9).

Laurence's death by suicide in January, 1987, changed everything. Terminally ill with cancer, Laurence organized her affairs, planned her funeral, and chose death on her own terms, alone in her own bed at home in Lakefield, Ontario (King xvii-xviii). Immediately the tenor of literary evaluation of her work shifted from respectful to mythifying. In the preface to *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour* of Margaret Laurence, Kristjana Gunnars writes about how she and the contributors to the collection came together after hearing of Laurence's illness, determined to publish their book while Laurence was still alive so that she would know how she "raised the value of all sectors of society by showing the full humanity of the most neglected and forgotten among us" (viii). When they failed in that quest, the purpose of the book changed to "gather longer, considered, thoughtful and well-researched essays" that would contribute seriously to existing Laurence scholarship (viii). That aim is largely achieved, in that the essays included in the collection take up a wider variety of topics found in Laurence's work: religion (Swayze, Hauge), voice and silence (van Herk, Brydon), autobiography (Buss), and feminism (Brydon, Fulton).

---

[2] Published as "Roots and Continuities" in New's collection, this short essay is now better known as "A Place to Stand On," the first essay in Laurence's collection *Heart of a Stranger* (1976). In *Heart of a Stranger*, Laurence acknowledges that she takes the essay's title from a poem written by her friend Al Purdy.

Crossing the River is the first critical collection I found that includes essays considering Laurence's work in connection with the feminist movement. Among them is Diana Brydon's "Silence, Voice, and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women" in which Brydon states simply that Laurence writes about women, therefore women read Laurence. Brydon demonstrates the significance of these straightforward statements when she continues by saying that the "female reader brings a perspective and expectations to a text that are different from those of the 'ideal' [male] reader we have been taught to try to emulate" (183). Another contributor to *Crossing the River*, Keith Louise Fulton, observes, in "Feminism and Humanism," that Laurence "explores the restricting definitions of women and dramatizes the ways that a woman's voice becomes a means to her self-representation" (99). Thus, these approaches are consistent with the work done by feminist literary critics in the 1970s and 80s.

Colin Nicholson's 1990 collection, *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence*, continues to explore the wide-ranging thematic appeal in Laurence's work. Noting in his preface that "a distinctive interweaving of her life and her life of writing is . . . one of the attributes of Laurence's fiction" (vii), Nicholson anticipates the commentary of Peter Easingwood's "The Realism of Laurence's Semi-Autobiographical Fiction," while Nicholson's statement that "Laurence has added to the ways in which we can understand ourselves and each other" (vii) points to Greta M. K. Coger's "Margaret Laurence's Manawaka: A Canadian Yoknapatawpha" which investigates Laurence's representation of Canadian prairie place and space. For me, however, the highlight of Nicholson's collection is Barbara Godard's "Caliban's Revolt: The Discourse of the (M)Other" in that it is chronologically the first essay on Laurence's work that examines how Laurence represents mothers. Arguing that by giving her maternal characters strong voices, Laurence reveals "the hierarchies and contradictions of the dominant discourse" and "the phallocentrism of the [canonical] tradition by displacing the hero" (208), Godard thus reveals the feminist tones in Laurence's fiction, echoing Kristjana Gunnars' reference to Laurence as a "founding mother of Canadian literature" in *Crossing the River* (viii): Godard is prescient in her statement that Laurence is a "literary mother for yet another generation of women writers" (221).

From her inclusion in Nicholson's 1990 collection, Greta Coger goes on to edit a 1996 collection of essays titled *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*. The title itself speaks to the widening perspectives that began to inform thinking about Laurence's work in the closing years of the twentieth century. Consisting of essays acknowledging the "richness of [Laurence's] imagery and the ever-present concreteness in her language" (Coger xxiv), *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence* features women thinkers writing about Laurence's work. Rosalie Murphy Baum examines "patterns of behaviour in old age" (153), specifically old women, as psychologically self-alienating, while Cynthia Taylor looks at how Laurence makes Hagar's self-reckoning a depiction of an "awakening contingent upon [Hagar's] ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother" (161). Considering the feminist reader, Mitzi Hamovitch positions *The Fire-Dwellers* as having a subversive voice that is the louder one of two voices, the other being "wistful, tentative, conformist, occasionally mildly rebellious, easily rebuffed, and sometimes fragmented" (173). Switching to autobiography as a topic, Alexandra Pett reads Laurence's memoir *Dance on the Earth* as "a dance in itself, a competition between subject and readers in which connections emerge and dissolve" (204). Both Susan Ward and Laurie Lindberg focus on *The Diviner*'s Morag Gunn, with Ward looking at Laurence's final novel as "the story of a woman and her career" (179), and Lindberg considering Morag's profession as a writer and her choice to make "language her life's work" (188). Thus, Coger's collection is distinctive in that it marks a shift towards reading Laurence through feminist critique.

As time created space between Laurence's death and critical approaches to her work, interest in and investigation into all its thematically significant aspects noticeably increased. Two separate but distinct approaches emerge: the first, dividing her work into two categories, the African and the Canadian, and, the second, after 1987, split between the need to analyze the work and the need to portray the writer biographically. Patricia Morley combines the two endeavours in *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home* (1991), a critical biographical study in which Morley approaches both the life and the work from the perspective of a journey, because travel "helped shaped [Laurence's] literary vision, and provided her a central metaphor" (15). Beyond the literal sense of that statement is also the knowledge of an earthly journey completed and the survivor's dilemma of what to do with that knowledge.

Yet more examination of Laurence's fiction followed in the 1990s. *Essays on Canadian Writing* (ECW Press) organized a series of monographs on specific Canadian works including four of Laurence's Manawaka Series. Among the entries included in this journal edition, Jon Kertzer examines *A Bird in the House* for its unifying qualities, claiming that it "provides the best avenue into all her work, which is united by recurring characters, techniques, and themes" (13). In two separate publications, Nora Foster Stovel delves into *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*, arguing first that *A Jest of God* is a pioneering text because Laurence "explores female sexuality and challenges the old double standard" (13), and next that *The Fire-Dwellers*' Stacey McAindra experiences first-hand the "consciousness-raising of the seventies' women's liberation movement" (13). In addition, Susan J. Warwick examines *The Diviners* as the pinnacle of Laurence's work, "much larger in thematic scope, much more experimental in style, and much more complex in its design than any of Laurence's earlier fiction" (14).

As the twentieth century draws to a close, more critical analysis of Laurence's work examines old and new themes from current perspectives. In *Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence*, editor Christian Riegel cites the "re-evaluation of the basic assumptions that underlie . . . understanding of Laurence's life and career" (xxii). Without elaborating on what those 'basic assumptions' are, Riegel goes on to hope for a "more pluralistic approach" for a "greater understanding of the multiplicity . . . of Laurence's oeuvre" (xxii). Despite the vagueness of these goals, the collection does offer a good range of meaningful investigations. For my purposes, Brenda Beckman-Long's "*The Stone Angel* as a Feminine Confessional Novel" is helpful in that Beckman-Long argues that the first novel in Laurence's Manawaka series is "a feminine confessional narrative that gives voice to a peculiarly feminine experience" (48). Useful to my discussion as well is Méira Cook's "Becoming the Mother: Construction of the Maternal in *The Diviners*," in which Cook takes the death of Morag's mother in the beginning of the novel as the foundation for reading *The Diviners* as accounting for "a maternal function that both authorizes and resists power" (82).

Writing in the new century continues to address Laurence and her work. Editor David Staines' 2001 collection *Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections* moves from a broad overview of Laurence's life and work (Lennox) to specific analysis of her work from a postcolonial perspective (Buss), an exploration of her "sense of the city" (Staines 4), contemplations of the women and the women's writing that is her work (Gunnars, van Herk), and assessments of Laurence's religious and literary visions (Wilson, Marshall). As Staines comments, the essays included in this most recent collection provide current "reflections that do not exhaust the illimitable wealth of critical discussion" (5). Indeed, although the more current works do reflect both the feminist and the maternal themes Laurence presents in her fiction, none as yet take up Laurence's fiction as representative of empowered and/or feminist mothering, which is the purpose I hold as I involve myself in this long, extensive, and seemingly endless conversation about the fiction produced by the former Peggy Wemyss and the now almost mythologized Margaret Laurence.

* * *

In a recent study about her "epic imagination," Paul Comeau argues that Margaret Laurence's contribution to this nation's writing and reading communities is the Canadian equivalent of that of both Milton and Dante; for Comeau, Laurence's work is a progressive purgatorial paradise. Citing the multi-ethnicity present in Laurence's writing and her portrayals of "the cultural reality of a nation forged in exile" (143) as what drew him to become a member of what Laurence's "tribe" (xviii),[3] Comeau situates her as the writer who "helped to give us our place to stand on and [who] continues to exert a compelling and guiding influence on Canadian literature" (144). Comeau is not the only critic to place Laurence at the apex of Canadian writing; others, such as Robert Kroetsch, have written about the extent of Laurence's "shadow" over Canadian fiction (Comeau xviii). One of Laurence's narrative strengths is that the range of her fiction draws a wide variety of readers, resulting in diverse readings from multiple perspectives; for example, where Comeau reads purgatory and paradise, others may see historical infusion or cultural relativity.

For many readers and critics, however, Laurence's Canadian fiction is about Canadian women. In her decidedly unsentimental style, Laurence imagines lived female lives that reflect lived female realities in Canada in the post-middle, early latter part of the twentieth century. Over the course of a fiction-writing career that began in her childhood[4] and peaked with the 1974 publication of *The Diviners*, Laurence writes beyond the normative connection between women and goodness in her fiction. Although Carol Shields also takes up female goodness in the fiction she produced from 1976 to 2002, the difference between how these two novelists investigate female goodness is significant: whereas Shields explores how expectations of goodness impact conventional female lives, Laurence reveals goodness as the pretense it is.

---

[3] "Tribe" is Laurence's own term. She uses it repeatedly in *Dance on the Earth*, usually in the context of a sense of community with other writers.

In "Self-Alienation of the Elderly in Margaret Laurence's Fiction," Rosalie Murphy Baum writes, somewhat single-mindedly, that the elderly women in Laurence's fiction are neurotic personalities who raise their children to become adults with impoverished personalities (155). Resulting from patterns repeated in families over multiple generations, these elderly neurotics, according to Baum, develop their neuroses from the variety of pretenses they have assumed in their lifetimes: "the pretense of love, the pretense of goodness, the pretense of interest and knowledge, the pretense of honesty and fairness, and the pretense of suffering" (155).[5] Describing how the difficult elderly women who appear in Laurence's fiction display characteristics ranging from compliance to aggression to detachment, Baum spends much time in her essay analyzing how these characters, as maternal figures, overpower their children. As a result, in these works, Baum says, the children are "less interesting fictional character[s] than the parent[s]" (160). While I agree that Hagar Shipley definitively dominates *The Stone Angel*, I have less inclination to visualize Mrs. Cameron as a more powerful figure than her daughter Rachel in *A Jest of God*. And although Baum's essay offers an intriguing commentary about fictional representations of a few so-called female neuroses, her argument falters because it does not consider how feminine conditioning and social convention also contribute to the development of these "neurotic personalities," a missing element that would provide a more complete exploration of her list of pretenses. However, despite this gap and Baum's seeming predilection to blame the first available mother for all lapses in familial behaviour, I do appreciate her inclusion of the "pretense of goodness" as a key landmark associated with conventional representations of both womanhood and motherhood.

---

[4] As a young girl, Laurence attempted to write a novel she referred to as *Pillars of the Nation* (Comeau xiii).

[5] Baum bases her analysis of neurotic behaviour in Laurence's old women on *Our Inner Conflicts* and *Self Analysis* by Karen Horney. Both Horney texts were written during the 1940s.

Although included in the "Feminist Perspectives in Laurence" section of *New Perspectives in Margaret Laurence* (1996), Baum's analysis of three elderly female characters in Laurence's novels – Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*; Mrs. Cameron in *A Jest of God*; and Grandmother MacLeod in *A Bird in the House* – is by no means a feminist critique. Indeed, Baum's argument could even be considered to function from a decidedly un-feminist agenda in which any woman who does not unfailingly meet normative social standards of mothering is somehow defective or in need of psychological therapy. For Baum, these three characters are "neurotic parents" who undermine their children's self-confidence; thus, Baum suggests that these mothers are solely responsible fore creating a "neurotic cycle . . . which cannot be easily broken" (154). Missing an important opportunity to branch into a further exploration into how the word "lady" functions in both past and present social orders, Baum uncritically depicts Mrs. Cameron as "all that a proper lady should be" (156) and Grandmother MacLeod as having "pretensions of being a lady" (158). As for Hagar Shipley, Baum's analysis situates her as "experiencing the humiliations of old age" (157) without commenting on the demeaning limitations imposed on older people through ageist stereotyping. Nevertheless, despite these significant gaps, Baum's essay does successfully illustrate that the association of goodness with normative notions of womanhood and motherhood is one that cannot be adequately understood through narrow disciplinary methods.

Elderly women form only part of a focus on the maternal in Laurence's fiction. In a body of work that focuses on female lives, Laurence has also created vivid portrayals of twentieth-century Canadian mothers. These portrayals are vivid because Laurence's protagonists are characterized by a feisty defiance: they have a spirited energy; they are forceful when confronted with opposition and restrictions; they take an aggressive approach to changing the conditions of their lives. Five separate but connected works make up what is known as Laurence's Manawaka Cycle, the linked series that consists of four novels—*The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1974)—and one collection of connected short stories, *A Bird in the House* (1970). In all these works, Laurence's female protagonists are often recalcitrant, frequently subversive, and usually transgressive. The socially contrary behaviour of the main characters in each of the four novels illustrates their plucky stamina: Hagar Shipley marries against her father's wishes; spinster Rachel Cameron has an affair with a married man, her sister Stacey McAindra also has an affair, leaving her children at home alone while she does so; and Morag Gunn leaves her proper, but stifling, marriage to become a single mother to a child fathered by her elusive Metis childhood friend, Jules Tonnerre.

Illuminating for any exploration into the feisty women of Laurence's Manawaka fiction is the autobiographical text Laurence wrote just before her death in 1987, *Dance on the Earth: a Memoir* (1989). In this self-reflexive work, Laurence offers a similar kind of end-of-life personal narrative that the indelible Hagar Shipley, undertakes in *The Stone Angel*. Unlike Hagar's story, however, Laurence's *Dance on the Earth* is neither a comprehensive nor a linear autobiography. Instead, it is a maternal trajectory in which Laurence contemplates her life's path through the mothers that influenced her along the way. Yet, Laurence's memoir is not a predictable tribute to conventional motherhood, as she establishes right from the opening sentences: "I have heard it said that war is for men what motherhood is for women. I find this appalling, and essentially quite false" (3). With this gruff beginning, *Dance on the Earth* announces its intention to defy popular notions of motherhood and, to that end, does not disappoint; indeed, even though some view *Dance on the Earth* as less "candid" than her fiction (Boughton 3), Laurence's memoir is occasionally equally as engaging as her fictional works. For the purposes of this discussion, *Dance on the Earth* is valuable because it illustrates not only how Laurence writes feminism and motherhood into her own rendition of the life she lived, but also how Laurence writes both empowered and feminist mothers into her fiction.

While empowered and feminist mothering are intimately connected, important differences distinguish the two models. Both recognize that patriarchal motherhood, the dominant North American paradigm of mothering, is "disempowering and restrictive to women" (Middleton 73); however, although all mothers who engage in feminist mothering practices are empowered mothers, not all empowered mothers practice feminist mothering:

> Empowered mothering . . . signifies a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood while feminist mothering refers to a particular style of empowered mothering in which this resistance is developed from and

> expressed through a feminist identification or consciousness. (O'Reilly *Maternal Theory*, 2007)

Empowered mothering works to take gender out of parenting: conventional notions that set mothering duties apart from fathering duties could and should dissipate as two people equitably take on the tasks of raising their children. Moreover, empowered mothers resist and challenge the patriarchal model, but do not necessarily strive to dismantle it. They recognize that motherhood is a significant site of power that is socially, culturally, and politically relevant outside the private domestic sphere that contains patriarchal motherhood, resist and challenge the patriarchal model, but do not necessarily strive to dismantle it.

The goal of feminist mothering is to dismantle patriarchal motherhood. In 1990, Tuula Gordon, one of the first theorists to examine feminist mothering, wrote that "motherhood . . . is used to provide and explanation and a justification for the subordination of women" (127). Sixteen years later, Andrea O'Reilly writes in *Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering*, that feminist mothering works as a "counter-narrative" (16), one that strives to disrupt and change the master narrative of patriarchal motherhood. As O'Reilly observes, a feminist mother is one "whose mothering, in theory and practice, is shaped and influenced by feminism" (*Rocking* 18).

Ideologically chained to conventional motherhood ideals that see biology – the female body carries the infant to full development and provides nourishment from its breasts – as the primary reason for female existence, who mother have by extension been culturally and socially assigned the primary caregiver role of raising their children, thus relegating anything else they may want or need to do in their lives to secondary status at most. Both empowered and feminist mothers demand for themselves a "selfhood outside of and beyond motherhood, but the move to "challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women" is a move made by feminist mothers deliberately and consciously (O'Reilly *Maternal Theory* 7-8).

In traditional views of motherhood, a woman who seeks satisfaction in other areas of her life, either primarily or equally to her mothering situation, in a quest *se faire raison a soi-meme*, to do oneself justice, is aberrant. Release from this limitation will only occur when the words "mother" and "father" become interchangeable: the word "parenting" must take over from the word "mothering." While empowered mothers acknowledge that any trusted adult can be the primary caretaker at any given moment, feminist mothering works towards the goal of empowerment for all mothers. These forms are transgressive: they reject dominant demands to conform to "good" mother ideals and know that being a mother is just one part of an autonomous life, a concept beneficial not only for mothers but also for children.

Current understandings of empowered and feminist mothering began to form in the first decades of second-wave feminism. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976, Adrienne Rich became the first western writer to distinguish between the expectations of patriarchal motherhood and individual mothering experiences, noting that the two are incompatible. At the end of this milestone work, Rich issues a challenge to change the long history that reads women as naturally mothers first and everything else second, a challenge she says will have long-term social benefits, will result in a "new relationship to the universe," and will transform "sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy . . . thinking itself" (286). Rich issues a big challenge indeed, one that has been taken up in the years since *Of Woman Born* made its startling appearance, by writers such as Nancy Friday, Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, Sharon Hays, Patrice DiQuinzio, and Andrea O'Reilly, to name but a few.[6]

One of the reasons the challenge of this type of investigation is so daunting is that feminism and motherhood exist in an oppositional tension, a tension rooted in the inescapable fact that feminism's goal is to work against the patriarchal social structure that holds a restrictive, and pervasive, ideal of motherhood as one of its fundamental institutions. The above writers who have examined this tension show that Rich's challenge is not only a difficult one, but also perhaps an impossible one, as the title of DiQuinzio's book, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, suggests. The impossibility she alludes to in her title works as an impasse, according to DiQuinzio, because of a teleological paradox: "it is impossible for feminist theory to avoid the issue of motherhood and it is impossible for feminist theory to resolve it" (xx).

The study of literature enlightens the choices individuals and communities must make, and thus becomes a significant field for the investigation of DiQuinzio's impossibility. As Pam Morris writes in *Literature and Feminism*, "we cannot assume that all writing by women will be necessarily or essentially 'feminine' in its perspectives and values" just as we cannot "assume that anything and everything written by women will be – somehow – feminist" (2). Noting that "language is the main means by which cultural values are recycled and sustained from generation to generation" (8), Morris goes on to comment that feminist criticism is something we "do" (9), an activity that follows the practice of literary production, making literature an essential site for comparative study. As a comparative site, literature is also the location of interactive relationships, between the written and the read, where cultural practices are recorded and interpreted. As Emily Jeremiah writes, the unique relationship that exists between reader and writer is "where the boundaries between self and other are negotiated, challenged, drawn, and redrawn" (14). The "self and other" Jeremiah refers to is at once a reflection, accurate or otherwise.

---

[6] Drawn from my discussion in this dissertation's introduction on the history of writing about mothering/motherhood, I cite the names on this abbreviated list of critics and writers because they have investigated western notions of motherhood since the publication of Rich's *Of Woman Born* because their work is well-known, thus representative of the development of critical thinking in this area, and because they were published in each subsequent decade: Nancy Friday's *My Mother My Self* appeared in 1977, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* both appeared in 1989, Sharon Hays' *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* in 1996, Patrice DiQuinzio's *The Impossibility of Motherhood* in 1999, and Andrea O'Reilly's *Rocking the Cradle* in 2006.

As an example of generational "self" and "other" interplay, *Dance on the Earth* is a text where a daughter must act as a "self" editor for her subsequently absent mother. According to the preface written by her daughter Jocelyn, when Margaret Laurence decided to write her memoir, she found that she could not proceed until she first examined the lives of "her three mothers, as she called them – her biological mother, her stepmother who became her mother, and her mother-in-law" (xi). The resulting self-reflexive exploration into her maternal history shaped the memoir's content and dictated the very structure of the finished product. The book that now stands as Margaret Laurence's last published work began ten years after the final component of Laurence's Manawaka series, *The Diviners*, was published in 1974. The first draft of *Dance on the Earth* was completed only one month before Laurence was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1986.

After her mother's death in 1987, Jocelyn Laurence was left to edit the final manuscript and write the above-mentioned preface, a postscript to her mother's life that sits at the beginning of her mother's story. The content of Laurence's memoir lives up to her daughter's comment that "my mother had more gut-level determination than almost anyone I've ever known" (xi); *Dance on the Earth* is a flinty commentary on a complex life. This memoir reveals not only the creative and lived inspirations that resulted in the Manawaka series but also, from the current perspective of twenty-first century Canada, offers retrospective, insightful reflections into the juxtapositions between fiction and fact, between lived experience and the process of formally recording that experience. Jocelyn Laurence comments that only when Laurence had settled on the maternal focus for her memoir could she branch out into social commentary about the world she had spent her life observing (xi). In addition to providing a format for Laurence to pay belated tribute to her three mothers, Jocelyn Laurence notes that the new structure also gave her mother room for "momentary digressions, too, into issues that most concerned her: nuclear disarmament, pollution and the environment, pro-choice abortion legislation" (xi). This list of "digressions" is one of considerable substance, consisting as it does of urgent global issues; it is a list that, written in 1989, could just as easily have been written today in 2007.

Although candid about the stand she takes on these major issues, Laurence is also protective about what she calls "her story":

> I knew I didn't want to write the entire story of my life, for numerous reasons, one of them being that it is mine and from the start I recognized that there were areas I wasn't prepared even to try to set

> down. I wanted to write more about my feelings about mothers and about my own life views. (7)

In this passage, Laurence sets limits on the autobiographical story she is about to tell, situating her own memoir into a category Leigh Gilmore refers to as a "limit-case" text. Pushing at the margins of their genre, these texts are productive for study, because, as Gilmore says, they illustrate "the way autobiography is partially structured through the proscriptions it places on self-representation" (6). Laurence establishes that she will set her own limits; she will not tell the parts of her life she considers "mine" alone. In this statement, I hear Laurence telling me that she will not let me into all of her life and that the parts of her story she wants to tell are those that facilitate her motivations to talk about issues that are important to her; one of those motivations is to examine how she was mothered, a motivation that takes on a higher priority than telling how she herself inhabited the maternal role.

In selecting particular life moments, Laurence recognizes the diversity of a readership that will mine her work for a myriad of different issues from a multitude of perspectives. As a reader, I must accept the self-editing imposed by both Margaret and Jocelyn Laurence. Working with auto-texts, texts written by the subject about the subject, is different than working with a biographical text, a text written about the subject by another. Biographies of Margaret Laurence delve into the issues in her life that she refused to deal with in her memoir: issues of alcoholism and marital infidelity become written into these works derived from both information and speculation. As both reader and critic, I am aware as well that, if she could, Laurence might take issue with the links I make between the autobiographical text that was her last book and her fiction.

Reviewers and critics alike have long referred to much of Laurence's work as rooted in autobiography. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence clearly states her position on this connection in particular and on critics and reviewers in general. Early on in the memoir, Laurence illustrates how individual writers often collide with the historical moment of their place and time. Commenting about why she submitted poems to her university's student paper under the male pseudonym of Steve Lancaster[7]: "Writing by women, in those and the following years, was generally regarded by critics and reviewers in this country with at best an amused tolerance, at worst a dismissive shrug" (5). From the outset, Laurence recognized the limits of her historical time.

As her writing years go by, this dismissive reception continues to irk Laurence; later in *Dance on the Earth*, she relates one particular incident. Reacting fiercely to a magazine writer who had interviewed her and subsequently deemed *The Diviners* "completely autobiographical," Laurence writes:

> I rank [*The Diviners*] as a kind of spiritual autobiography. I suppose the one novel I've written that was not thought, by at least some reviewers, to be autobiographical in some sense was *The Stone Angel*. Even the most obtuse of sensibilities could not imagine that I was a ninety-year old woman. But because I have written so much about women, I have often been told I write autobiographically. I have no objection to writers who do write straight out of their own lives, but apart from *A Bird in the House*,

---

[7] Laurence chose 'Steve' just because she likes the name, and 'Lancaster' after the aircraft that dropped bombs for the Allies in the Second World War (5).

> which is loosely based on my family and my childhood, I don't happen to be one of them. (208-209)

While her response is stubbornly rooted in a literal reading of the differences between herself and Hagar Shipley, Laurence's comments here strongly imply that book reviewers suffer from "obtuse" sensibilities and that they are incapable of interpreting literary texts without biographical material about the author, especially if that author happens to be female. Noting as well that reviewers often take this approach to her work because she writes about women, Laurence points to the frustrations often experienced by women writers when dealing with reviewers and critics. Mainstream critics have all too often demonstrated a propensity for responding to writing by women as just that, writing by women, whereas writing by men is, well, just writing.[8] In the above passage, Laurence designates *The Diviners* as her "spiritual autobiography" and *A Bird in the House* as "loosely autobiographical"; in doing so, Laurence illustrates the incomplete separation that occurs when a writer sits down to imagine a created, yet plausible, world from words, a world from which the writer can separate her life, but a world that cannot be separated from who she is.

Its status as a posthumously published memoir has not rendered *Dance on the Earth* immune to critical judgment. As Alexandra Pett observes, "many readers have found Laurence's perspective of her life disappointing, even dishonest, in its concealment . . . in its seemingly intended silencing of readers' questions" (205). Indeed, in this incomplete autobiography, Laurence does protect the details she feels the public need not know about her private life: the information she provides about the breakdown of her marriage is scant and any extended commentary on her relationship with her children is largely absent. Still, my sense is not that Laurence's primary purpose for writing her memoir was to defuse gossip, but rather that her decision to write a memoir provided a genre in which she could unravel her late-in-life thoughts about the social dilemmas that many of her female fictional characters, with the possible exception of writer Morag Gunn, would keep to themselves in their private lives. More confessional in her fiction than in her memoir, Laurence had specific purposes for *Dance on the Earth*, to pay tribute to her three mothers and to declare her inner passions about social issues. True to her determined nature, she did not stray from either of those purposes.

---

[8] Perhaps not coincidentally, in 1976, just a few years after the publication of *The Diviners* garnered both heated criticism and high praise for Laurence, Margaret Atwood wrote, albeit reluctantly as she herself admits, about being a woman writer: Atwood observes that "the woman writer . . . exists in a society that, though it may turn certain individual writers into revered cult objects, has little respect for writing as a profession, and not much respect for women either" (*Second Words* 204).

Laurence set a precedent with *Dance on the Earth* because in it she "sums up her views more clearly than any of the other Canadian women autobiographers of her vintage" (Pett 213). Some of the views Laurence expresses are revisions of her former, private, yet published, self. In straightforward declarations, Laurence talks about her development as a writer and as a feminist. Declaring that she "counts" herself as a feminist, she laments essential generalizations applied to both men and women in common public discourse (4). Further on, she expands on those generalizations when she laments about how "regrettably long" she took to find her own autonomous writing voice. Laurence then cites the example of her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, published in 1960, in which she describes the birth of a child from a father's perspective:

> How could I have done? How could I have been so stupid, so self-doubting? . . . women writers had virtually no models in describing birth, or sex, from a woman's view. . . . I who had experienced such

> joy with sex, such anguish and joy in the birth of my children, not only didn't have the courage to describe these crucial experiences; it didn't even occur to me to do so. (5-6)

As a reproach to self, this vehement passage is possibly addressed to future critics and reviewers. Indeed, Laurence immediately goes on to talk about one particular male reviewer of *This Side Jordan*, an unnamed "dolt" who commented on the novel with a "ho-hum . . . why do we always have the obligatory birth scene in novels written by women" (6). This "dolt" moves Laurence to a mini-rant, not the only one in *Dance on the Earth*, in which she chastises male writers for "unending scenes of violence, blood, and gore in the service of destruction and death" (6). Although Laurence invokes essentialist argument strategies as she rebukes essentialist critics, that logical lapse is almost extinguished by the fire of her retort.

Reviewers were not the only people in the industry with whom Laurence verbally sparred, sometimes for the good of her finished work. Rejecting her publishers' suggestions and finding them cold to her proposed title of *Hagar*,[9] Laurence had difficulty naming her first novel until she re-read her opening sentence: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand" (3). Thus, the statue in the Manawaka cemetery that memorializes Regina Weese, mother to the novel's cranky protagonist, Hagar Shipley, provides the very apt title for the 1964 novel that begins Laurence's Manawaka series, *The Stone Angel*. Unlike the weathered but resilient stone the statue is made of, Hagar remembers her mother as "a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard, caring with martyred devotion for an ungrateful fox-voiced mother year in and year out" (4). The "ungrateful, fox-voiced woman" was the grandmother, who, inconveniently for her sons, Hagar remembers, lived another ten years after Hagar's mother died. Less than two pages into the novel, Laurence has already vividly depicted how cultural values and roles reproduce from one generation to the next.

---

[9] In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence writes that "we were going through tribulations with the title of the novel . . . . All three publishers [Macmillan, Knopf, and McClelland and Stewart] kept sending me suggestions. All were awful. . . . I picked up the manuscript, not having looked at it for months, and the title stared out at me in the first sentence of the book itself" (163-164).

Anticipating the situation Carol Shields would create almost thirty years later in *The Stone Diaries*, Laurence deprives Hagar of a mother at the moment of her birth. From then on, Hagar shows symptoms of matrophobia: she rejects the weakness she associates with her mother and resists any tendencies she may have to be like her at every opportunity. Even when her brother Dan is dying, she cannot wear her mother's shawl in an effort to comfort him, as her older brother Matt suggests, because

> all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest . . . . To play at being her—it was beyond me" (25).

However, in her resistance to anything resembling feminine frailness, Hagar comes to be like the stone angel that stands for the mother she never knew, comes to be the contentious old lady her son Marvin refers to as a "holy terror" (304), a sobriquet Hagar herself realizes comes out of a conflict of emotion, out of "such anger and such tenderness" (305).

Marvin is not the only man in Hagar's life to respond to her with both affection and anger. Years after her marriage is over, Hagar realizes that her husband, Bram, in the volatile power struggle that shaped their relationship, offered her an emotional haven she rejected. Hagar remembers that "*his banner over me was love*" (italics in original, 80); admitting that she does not know how the phrase came into her reflection, she does admit that she knows it is true and also that she did not reciprocate. Indeed, in refusing to participate in anything resembling weak behaviour, Hagar not only transgresses convention, she also denies herself any pleasure she yearns to take in the positive feelings she does have for Bram, and only allows herself to nurture the negative ones.

At long last repudiating what Cynthia Taylor refers to as "the cult of true womanhood" (162), Hagar is in her nineties before she recognizes how the values she absorbed through father's autocratic parenting style and the pretenses of being a lady she learned from her finishing-school experience have impacted not only her entire life, but also the lives of her two sons. Interfering in her son John's life to the extent that she has to accept some responsibility for his death, and withholding approval and affection from her surviving son Marvin, Hagar assists in perpetuating disabling myths about women and mothers. Although she resists the concept of womanhood to which social mores expect her to conform, Hagar does not have the consciousness or the informed network to allow her to engage in any positive resistance, leaving her instead to react through destructive rejection.

Kristjana Gunnars writes that Laurence's "women protagonists are enmeshed in politics, and their attempt to speak, in fact to rejoice, is in and of itself a political act" (126). Hagar's resistance has been constant throughout her life, but her understanding of it has been missing; she is encompassed by a politics she does not see until her final days. She knows only silence, the impenetrable aura surrounding the stone angel that stands in for her dead mother. Only through the final analysis she embarks on, the narrative that is

The Stone Angel, does Hagar realize that she has in fact participated in the very ideals she should have been rejecting:

> Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances—oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? (292)

In this passage, cited by some critics as *The Stone Angel's* "most famous passage" (Taylor 170), Hagar recognizes too late that, throughout her life, she has misread the power relations of her heritage and the impossibility of the pretenses she allowed to inform her decisions and choices.

Although Hagar causes havoc in the lives of her son Marvin and daughter-in-law Doris with her unpredictable demands and antics, erratic behaviour cannot be deemed completely unusual for a ninety-year old woman rapidly approaching death. In the short periods of quiet that punctuate the chaos she causes, Hagar remembers the defining moments of her life: these moments ultimately lead her back to the absence of her mother in her life. However, unlike the motivation of her childhood and young adult years, Hagar is no longer driven by a need to be unlike the image she holds of her mother, an image that portrays her as both meek and weak, having "a frailty [Hagar] could not help but detest" (25). Rather, Hagar learns at last that she was born into an ideological environment that traditionally situates strength as male and weakness as female. For most of her life, Hagar does not see the cultural and social construction of that identity, but instead accepts that construction unquestioningly, investing her mother with the traditions of female weakness, a woman who demonstrated the particular frailty historically associated with women: death by childbirth.

Whether separated by death or ideologies, mother-daughter stories steeped in conflict are hardly unusual in fiction. Nevertheless, written during a time when second-wave feminism was rising in the public consciousness, Laurence's Canadian fiction is unusual and subversive because its memorable characters, prominent by their presence rather than their absence, are mothers who resist conforming to the motherhood ideal. As Hagar finally understands, proper appearances operate under a guise of acceptability that masks their ideological function. While the stone statue standing in a cemetery ostensibly memorializes the absence of Hagar's mother, its presence, as Di Brandt writes, functions more "to spell out [patriarchal] triumph, a celebration of the father's social position in the community, than [to grieve] for a lost love" (20).

The statue also stands as a silent reminder that *The Stone Angel*'s considerable narrative clout comes from Hagar's elderly recognition of how the proper appearances celebrated by the statue's mute memorialization of her mother have affected Hagar's own conflicted negotiations as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother throughout her life. Hagar's aged contemplations have been sometimes been viewed as an awakening. Whether or not Hagar's reflections at age ninety can really be considered a very late in life awakening is debatable. I prefer to think of Hagar as finally putting her pretensions aside to hear what she has been silencing in herself all her years. In her tenth decade of life, it is far too late for Hagar to be 'awakened'; rather, in the Judeo-Christian tradition that has shaped her life, she is preparing for a restful eternity.

Nevertheless, considering Hagar's heightened awareness as an awakening for this analytical moment has its benefits. Cynthia Taylor argues that as Laurence's readers experience the various awakenings of her female characters, they also experience their own awakenings (161). While Taylor's claim is not easily substantiated, she does move on to depict the components that make up a novel of awakening: "survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality, and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present" (161). Read in this context, *The Stone Angel* is clearly in the tradition of "awakening" novels written by women. Laurence's first Canadian novel links awakening directly to, in Hagar's case, her protagonist's "ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother" (161). The awakening theme continues throughout the Manawaka series and culminates with Laurence's last Canadian novel, *The Diviners*, a narrative that depicts inner passions, torments, and an awakening to their influences. Taken in a timely national context, these awakened links also illustrate the tensions between traditional versions of motherhood and contemporary realities of lived mothering in mid-twentieth century Canada.

Laurence is very adept at creating mothers no one would want to have. Following in the considerable wake of the irascible Hagar Shipley, comes Mrs. Cameron of *A Jest of God*. Published in 1966, a mere two years after *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God* depicts a mother-daughter relationship based on the passive-aggressive[10] exploitation of Rachel Cameron by her widowed mother. Like *The Stone Angel*, the novel is a first-person narration, a story of selfhood told by Rachel, a thirty-four year old teacher who worries about becoming an eccentric spinster (10). Living with her mother, Rachel stoically endures her mother's ritual performance of appropriate motherhood. Laurence's description of Mrs. Cameron's appearance depicts an older woman who has spent her life adhering to the image of a lady:

---

[10] Not being a psychologist or a psychiatrist, I use the term 'passive-aggressive' in its lay sense of attempted manipulation of a situation or person by obstructionist means of resistance such as procrastination, refusal to participate, or other diversionary tactics.

> She stands beside the stove. Her heart is tricky and could vanquish her at any moment. Yet her ankles are still slender and she takes pride in wearing only fine-denier nylons and never sensible shoes. Her hair is done every week, saucily stiff grey sausage curls, and the frames of her glasses are delphinium blue and elfin. Where does this cuteness come from . . . . (21)

With her stylish demeanour and halo of "cuteness," Mrs. Cameron's appearance fits exactly the image of mid-twentieth-century motherhood: a creation right out of the North American 1950s, all she needs is a string of pearls and an apron.

As descriptive as it is, Mrs. Cameron's appearance only suggests whereas the dialogue Laurence gives her provides a detailed portrait of mid-century mothering. When Rachel tells her mother that she has decided to go out for the evening, Mrs. Cameron slips into a manipulative agreeability. Although repetitive in content, Rachel's mother's response is worth including here in full:

> "Well, it's quite all right, dear. I'm only saying if you would have let me know, it would have been better, that's all. I could have invited one of the girls in, maybe. Well, never mind. I shall be quite fine here by myself. I'll just slip into my housecoat, and make some coffee, and have a nice quiet evening. I'll be just dandy. Don't you

> worry about me a speck. I'll be perfectly all right. If you'd just reach down my pills for me from the medicine cabinet. As long as they're there where I can get them handily, in case anything happens. I'm sure I'll be fine. You go ahead and enjoy yourself, Rachel." (72)

I cannot read this passage without laughing. In fact, I think I roared into laughter the very first time I read it back in the seventies. Virtually any white middle-class Canadian girl from the prairies would understand immediately the irony and the agony Laurence infuses into Mrs. Cameron's attempt to derail her daughter's evening out. I imagine Laurence laughing too, chortling away into her typewriter in the corner of her Elm Cottage office in England, her sense of propriety heightened by her life in England with its longstanding class- and gender-based traditions of appropriate behaviour.[11]

Indeed, Mrs. Cameron may have even manipulated Laurence's choices. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence says that this novel demanded to be told before its sister novel, *The Fire-Dwellers*, and that she wrote it "as though taking down dictation" (176), dictation no doubt fueled by her prairie childhood and memories of posses of passive-aggressive mothers with manicured hair managing their daughters into conforming to their wishes. For women like Mrs. Cameron, the raw self-reflexivity undertaken by Hagar Shipley would have been impossible; they would have had to admit that their entire lives had been based on acquiescence and pretense. Rather than undergoing an awakening, they would have erased meaning from the lives they had already lived.

---

[11] After separating from her husband Jack, Laurence moved to England with her two children, living and writing there from 1962 to 1973. With the exception of *The Stone Angel*, which was largely written while she lived in Vancouver, Laurence wrote all the Manawaka works in England, prompting observations that she had to get away from Canada in order to write effectively about it.

A Jest of God takes up the rigid codes for appropriate sexual behaviour for women that were in place in the middle of the twentieth century. During the course of the novel, Rachel has an unhappy affair with a former friend from high school who returns to Manawaka. Eventually Nick Kazlik disentangles himself from their affair by telling Rachel he is married when he is in fact single. Rachel's life is further complicated by a pregnancy scare that turns out to be a benign tumour. Although Rachel fears that she is pregnant, when she goes to the doctor, she does not voice that fear. Her doctor, knowing that she is an older single woman with a responsible career, jokes that she is in no danger of losing her "good" status. When Rachel tells him her symptoms, "I've missed my period this month," she waits for the expected recrimination. Instead, Dr. Raven replies, "at least we know there's no question of one thing, anyway, with a sensible girl like yourself. . . . Can't say the same for them all, I'm afraid" (184). This malignant judgment about younger women who come to him with a pregnancy but no husband, elicits a furious inner response in Rachel:

> I can't believe he's saying it, and yet it's only too easy to believe. No words for my anger could ever be foul or wounding enough, against him, for what he's saying. I could slash gouges out of his seemly face with my nails. I could hurl at him a voice as beserk as any car crash.
>
> I sit on the chair opposite his desk and I say nothing. (184)

Whether or not Rachel is indignant about Dr. Raven's assumption that she could not be sexually active or the intimation that young girls are deviants who somehow irresponsibly become pregnant on their own is not clear. What is clear is that Rachel feels immediate inner anger, but her social conditioning in the ways of feminine passivity overrides any outward expression of that anger. She manages her wrath by sitting quietly in front of this voice of authority. At this point, Rachel is in danger of becoming a replica of Hagar's stone angel, feeling her anger but controlling any possible transgressive reaction.

Nevertheless, the novel goes on to demonstrate how one individual can disrupt and subvert dominant conventions in that Rachel does not take Hagar's path. Refusing the familiar confined vision of motherhood as always a selfless labour of love requires effort for one ensconced in that vision, one that, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes, romanticizes mothering and results in "issues of power . . . deemed irrelevant or made invisible" (16). In a sequence that demonstrates the dissipation of that mythical power, *A Jest of God* portrays Laurence's spinster protagonist transgressing the expected past model. Instead of capitulating to her own stifling status quo, she decides to change both her life and her mother's by moving them out to Vancouver where she has been offered a teaching job and her mother could spend time with her other daughter and her grandchildren.

Predictably, Rachel's mother resists and throws all her manipulation tactics at her daughter during a five-page scene in which Laurence plays Mrs. Cameron's protestations against Rachel's newly found determination. First dismissing the move to Vancouver as a "silly" idea (198), Mrs. Cameron then tries empathy, commenting that she realized their life together may have been a "strain" for Rachel (198). When Rachel agrees that it has been a strain, her mother immediately becomes defensive. Rachel remains unmoved, so her mother accuses her of being "unfair" (199). Rachel is firm. Mrs. Cameron protests that she cannot sell her furniture (200). Rachel has an answer for that excuse as well, and her mother finally resorts to tears, telling her daughter she has become "nasty and mean" (200). When that still does not change Rachel's mind, Mrs. Cameron triumphantly plays her trump card: saying that she does not blame Rachel for not considering it, but that she "doubts very much . . . that my silly old heart could stand the move" (201). Prepared for this argument, Rachel calmly replies that she has considered her mother's heart and has decided they must take that risk. Her mother "turns on" Rachel, saying "so that's the kind of person *you* are" (201). Still Rachel stands firm.

In a demonstration of a feminist mother in the making, Rachel gains strength as this confrontation progresses, displaying a composed determination that has previously been absent from her character. As this struggle of words and wills plays out, Rachel realizes that she has enabled her mother to control her life all these years simply by making Rachel responsible for her well-being:

> . . . I really wonder now why I have been so ruthlessly careful of her, as though to preserve her throughout eternity, a dried flower under glass. I'm not responsible for keeping her alive. There is, suddenly, enormous relief in this realization. (202)

This epiphanic moment is a realization that releases Rachel from her role as failed spinster daughter dutifully tending to her "good" mother. In her community, neighbours and friends would have thought of Mrs. Cameron as a good mother, one who strives to direct her daughter to live a life by normative standards.

The scene ends with Rachel comforting Mrs. Cameron, much as a mother would comfort an upset child. At that moment, Rachel realizes that the power dynamic in their relationship has changed: "I am the mother now" (203). In the end, Rachel becomes mother to her mother; her "elderly child" sleeps beside her as they make their way to Vancouver to join in the lives of Rachel's sister Stacey and her family. In a sense, Rachel has become a feisty feminist mother to her bewildered parent-child. Moreover, Laurence has illustrated that women ultimately can be mothers not only to the children they produce but also to the adults that produced them.

In an afterword to the 1988 New Canadian Library edition of *A Jest of God*, Margaret Atwood comments that Rachel had existed in a prison, one she had to escape from, an escape that was difficult because Rachel's prison "is made mostly of virtues gone sour" (213-214). Although Rachel is locked in what may seem now to be a self-imposed prison and, as a career-minded single woman today, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, she would not be seen as abnormal, Atwood's observation points to the novel's critical centre, its illustration of the power of "overwhelming social assumptions" (214), and a social critique that gives *A Jest of God* continuing relevance. Atwood also notes that *A Jest of God* is a novel about mothering, or rather about "the relationships between those who mother and are mothered" (214). The dated kind of mothering Mrs. Cameron engages in, that Rachel must learn to resist, and that her sister Stacey has distanced herself from all her adult life is the Canadian mid-twentieth-century notion of the "good" mother. Laurence spends much of her first two novels in the Manawaka series dissecting this maternal goodness, revealing it as integral to the aforementioned list of assumed pretenses that Rosalie Murphy Baum investigates (155).

After *A Jest of God*, this version of the good mother becomes far less prominent in Laurence's fiction, but *A Bird in the House*'s Grandmother MacLeod is one exception. A fictional text closely based on Laurence's family life in Neepawa, Manitoba, *A Bird in* *the House* follows the first-person style of *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*. The collection's narrator is a young girl, Vanessa MacLeod. In "The Loons," Vanessa tells a story that shows how her grandmother perpetuates prejudicial racist thinking by refusing to spend the summer at the family cottage if Piquette, "that half-breed youngster," accompanies them (110). Laurence teases a small bit of dark humour into this contentious moment by having Vanessa's mother, who had also just expressed concern about her children associating with Piquette because she might have "nits in her hair" (110), jump at the opportunity to spend a summer without her mother-in-law by agreeing to have Piquette join them. This aspect of Grandmother MacLeod's character demonstrates the familial transmission of cultural assumptions, as well as the ways those assumptions are digested in the moment and in the self-reflexive aftermath that is life contemplation and life-writing.

Grandmother MacLeod appears several times in *A Bird in the House*; in each appearance Laurence meticulously adds to her pretentious characterization. Vanessa's grandmother refuses any reality that does not suit her. She oversees the lives of her son and his family with a cool detachment, all the while creating "a romantic, fictitious past for herself" (Baum 159). When the family's financial situation becomes strained, she engages in ordering exotic items from England and hires a housekeeper. A figure of reproach to everyone who lives with her, Grandmother MacLeod maintains her pretense of privilege. She hovers in the background of many of the stories in the collection, a reminder of a past that limits the present.

Figures like Grandmother MacLeod are completely absent from the third text in Laurence's Manawaka cycle, *The Fire-Dwellers*. Written immediately following *A Jest of*

God, this novel is Stacey McAindra's story. Stacey is Rachel Cameron's sister, and the events in *The Fire-Dwellers* take place in the months before Rachel ultimately arrives at the decision that she and their mother must move to Vancouver. To tell Stacey's story, Laurence turns to complex techniques of characterization and structure. Indeed, the unique structure of *The Fire-Dwellers* is what significantly reflects the inner conflicts that many women face as they search for autonomy in the middle of mothering a traditional family. Life on Bluejay Crescent is not a sunny song for Stacey, and Laurence spends much of the novel depicting the conscious and unconscious discords that plague her thirty-nine year old protagonist.

Mother to four children, wife to Mac McAindra, the struggling husband she thinks of as "Agamemnon king of men" (8), Stacey dominates *The Fire-Dwellers*, a novel that features several layers of dialogue, all Stacey's. First is the dialogue she has with the other characters in the novel, the words she says out loud. Simultaneously, indicated by dashes, is the dialogue that speaks inside Stacey's head, the words she thinks but does not say. As well, indicated by italics, is a dialogue of the subconscious, a dialogue of the self Stacey must stifle in order to conform to her role as wife and mother. When Mac presses Stacey to stop getting up in the night to comfort their young son who is having nightmares, Stacey replies out loud "I don't mean to baby him. I'll try not to. Honestly, Mac, I will" (30); however, the words inside Stacey's head are quite different:

> I will. I will anything. I will turn myself inside out. I will dance on the head of a pin. I will yodel from the top of the nearest dogwood tree. I will promise anything, for peace. Then I will curse myself for it, and I'll curse you too. Oh, Mac. (30)

Conveying the resignation that has entered their marriage, Stacey's inner response belies the honesty she professes in her spoken words and also indicates her quest for peace, a quest she embarks on by cursing herself.

Moments later, however, as she wills herself into sleep for the night, Stacey's subconscious takes over:

> *The hillside is burning. Who dropped a lighted cigarette? Did she? Evergreen catches fire with terrible ease. In case of fire, all the men have to go and fight it. That is the law of the land. Everyone has to obey the law of the land. But only the men are forced to go. The children have no business to be there. Only one way to get to them. A black fallen tree across the pit. A suspension bridge across the jagged rock canyon. . . . She will be all right, if only she does not look down. . . . She is holding the hands of one. Which? She will not be allowed to return. . . . She must not look to see which one. . . . She must never know who was left behind. . . . Philosophy, my dear, is useless under certain circumstances.* (30-31)

When a child has a nightmare, soothing comfort is often immediately available; when mother has a nightmare, comfort seldom arrives. Comfortless in the above sequence, Stacey dreams of being unable to save all her children; she dreams of being forbidden to participate fully in life's fights; she dreams that she cannot fight her fears; and she dreams that she will be unable to think her way through her difficulties. With these multiple layers, Laurence effectively mines a host of issues that shape Stacey's life. The thematic significance of this framework highlights the constraints that women face once committed to the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Stacey lives in a fire fueled by anxiety and doubt, anger and silence. She is a fire-dweller whose inner voice will refuse to stay inside much longer.

The resistance heard in Stacey's inner voice finds its drive in the subconscious motivations that, as Mitzi Hamovitch writes, recognizes "the subversive feminine voice of the 1950s that murmured beneath the surface of events" (176). Significantly, the word "duty" appears often in Stacey's inner dialogue: she thinks of herself as "absent. Sad defection of duty" (41) in connection with her son Duncan's poor performance at school. Recognizing the social pressures that shape her life, Stacey admits that "I feel it's my duty to appear to be doing my duty" (45). When memory takes her back to her Manawaka home, Stacey realizes that it never leaves her:

> I stand in relation to my life both as child and parent, never quite finished with the old battles, never able to arbitrate properly the new, able to look both ways, but whichever way I look, God, it looks pretty confusing to me. (46)

Frozen at a chaotic intersection, where she can see clearly backwards, but not so clearly in the direction of the immediate future, Stacey's confusion combines with a deeply conditioned inner call for help. In this attempt to arbitrate between the formative foundations of her childhood and the conditions of her adult life, Stacey inserts an appeal to God.

Never far from the surface in Laurence's writing, religious references indicate yet another social pressure adding to her character's struggles for complete identities. A few days later, on a Sunday morning, Stacey's inner dialogue reveals that she takes on sole responsibility for her children's religious training, and admits again a failure of duty:

> I haven't done well by them. I've failed them by failing to believe, myself. I pretend to it, but they are not deceived. Yet I am the one who wakens them on Sunday mornings and shoves them off churchwards. One more strand in the tapestry of phoniness. (68).

Stacey is beginning to realize in her conscious mind what she has known in her unconscious, that twentieth-century western culture effectively uses Christian religions to reinforce the dominance of patriarchy's social order. Teaching failure as a female condition is an effective way to perpetuate subordination, a subordination embedded in the initial story of the Christian bible with the Original Sin, the failure of Eve to prevent the exile of human beings from the original garden paradise.[12]

Nevertheless, Stacey is defiant enough to challenge her childhood religious conditioning. She sees how her own life is being lost among her motherhood duties and anxieties. A personal inner conversation with God shows how Stacey's concerns reflect what is now known as feminist mothering:

> Listen, God, I know it's a worthwhile job to bring up four kids. You don't need to propagandize me; I'm converted. But how is it that I can feel as well that I'm spending my life in one unbroken series of trivialities? The kids don't belong to me. They belong to themselves. It would be nice to have something of my own,

---

[12] For further commentary on religion in Laurence's writing, see Michel Fabre's "Words and the World: *The Diviners* as an Exploration of the Book of Life." For religious commentary from Laurence herself, see "Statement of Faith." For comments on the impact of Eve on western women, see Margaret Atwood's "The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School."

> that's all. (89-90)

Written seven years before Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, *The Fire-Dwellers* consistently reflects the struggle between being an individual and being a mother that Rich's text would address. Stacey's thoughts regularly shift between rejecting her motherhood duties—"I'm not a good mother. I'm not a good wife. I don't want to be. I'm Stacey Cameron and I still love to dance" (124)—and her ongoing debate with the God that lives in her formative being:

> Listen here, God. Don't talk to me like that. You have no right. You try bringing up four kids. Don't tell me you've brought up countless millions because I don't buy that. We've brought our own selves up and precious little help we've had from you. If you're there. Which probably you aren't, although I'm never convinced totally, one way or another. (156)

This passage reflects not only that Stacey's dilemma is one that demands ultimate defiance, but also points to Laurence's own ongoing debate with faith. Proclaiming herself "a Christian, a woman, a writer, a parent, a member of humanity, and a sharer of life" in "A Statement of Faith," Laurence, speaking to a group of theology students, stops short of denying religion, but does comment that in a newly "terrifying world" that has the power to destroy itself, it is not "enough to hope and pray that our own lives and souls will know grace (56). Social justice, she recognizes, will not fall from the heavens but must be actively pursued by every agential being. For Laurence, then, Stacey's debate with God is thus not only feminist, but also humanist.[13]

Stacey and Mac's relationship becomes increasingly strained. About to launch into her short-lived affair with the mysterious Luke, Stacey's negative thoughts become even more prominent: "I'm bloody sick of trying to cope. I don't want to be a good wife and mother" (161). Nevertheless, Stacey's resilience does not fail her. Laurence, well-aware that being a mother is not a static condition but one that shifts and transforms both the mother and the mothered, infuses Stacey's anxieties with a transitional sense that somehow stabilizes her thinking. As she contemplates her teenaged daughter Katie, Stacey realizes that "one day she will have to take over as the mother, and she's beginning to sense it. No wonder it frightens her. It damn near terrifies me, the whole business, even after all these years" (249). As personal conflicts do, rather than reaching a definitive resolution, Stacey's moment of chaos passes. She returns to the family she never really left in a more reflective frame of mind that allows her to cope with the pressures of traditional domestic life with a more proactive consciousness: "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world" (276). With these words, the chaos in her life calming down, and a new perspective on her situation in her family, Stacey faces her future as an empowered mother: a mother who knows that her role is powerful and that having an autonomous self informs that power.

If, as Laurence says in *Dance on the Earth*, *The Diviners* is her "spiritual autobiography," then Morag Gunn is her spiritual representation. Thus, it is not surprising that Morag's struggles involve the difficulties that arise as she strives to realize her goals as a writer while simultaneously yearning for and becoming solely responsible for a child.

---

[13] In this instance, I do not use the term "humanist" in the sense of post-Renaissance humanism that has been rightly criticized for privileging the male human: instead, I use it in the lay sense that Stacey's concern is for all people, all humans.

This important difference separates Morag from all Laurence's other fictional mothers: unlike Hagar Shipley and Stacey McAindra, Morag chooses to have both a child and a career outside of marriage. Morag takes an unconventional life path, making *The Diviners*, as Susan Ward says, "the story of a woman and her career" (179). This unusual depiction of the last prominent fictional character Laurence creates indicates not only a shift in narrative focus, but also perhaps the influence of her own first-hand experience of single motherhood. Morag is one of the first, if not the first, feminist mothers in Canadian literature.

As a key character in the entire Manawaka series, Morag has attracted much attention. According to Margaret Atwood, Morag is a woman writer who discovers that "she cannot write and retain the love of a good man. She chooses the writing . . . and at the end of the book she is living alone" (Curse of Eve 226). Morag rejects the stifling childlike role of cosseted bride that her professor husband, Brooke Skelton, wants her to wear continuously, one that denies her any type of individuated growth within their relationship. The category of wife is one she must throw off, yet the throwing off is difficult: after yet another argument with Brooke, Morag realizes that "she is . . . very angry, and at the same time doubtful of her right to be angry, at him or the composition of her own composite self" (277). But Morag is too strong to be denied full participation in the world she occupies. *The Diviners* stands as the extended narrative explanation of Morag's solution to her dilemma. Her dual ambitions to be both a writer and a mother situate Morag as Laurence's strongest representation of feminist mothering. By not sacrificing her own needs to the expected roles of wife and mother, Morag steps outside the boundary that *The Fire-Dwellers'* Stacey McAindra stays within.

Stepping outside that boundary brings Morag into intimate contact with the biases of a rigid society. Laurence includes in *The Diviners* a scene reminiscent of *A Jest of God*, when Rachel Cameron goes to a doctor who is negatively judgmental about unmarried pregnant girls. In *The Diviners*, when in labour at the hospital, Morag corrects a nurse who assumes she is a "Mrs." The nurse replies sternly: "I wouldn't advertise [your unmarried status] if I were you. . . . You're just lucky they're letting you have the baby here." Far from submissive, Morag is not subdued into silence, instead retorting "Where do you think I should have it? . . . in a ten-acre field?" (326). Moreover, Morag does not lose that feistiness once in the delivery room and continues to push against restrictive procedures that deny mothers equitable participation in the birth experience. Determined to see her child when she wants to instead of when the doctor or the nurses decide she can, Morag demands to see her baby immediately. She receives a tired response from a doctor clearly yearning for days past when he could render new mothers totally passive: "these conscious births" [he] sighs (327). As these and other examples[14] demonstrate, Laurence does not miss opportunities to illustrate the injustices embedded in western society's most esteemed institutions.

In *The Diviners*, Laurence may also be dealing with her own conflicts about an unjust perception embedded in her body of work. The character of Piquette Tonnerre makes three appearances in the Manawaka series. In Laurence's short story "The Loons" (published first in the *Atlantic Advocate* and then in *A Bird in the House*), Vanessa

---

[14] Laurence also portrays deep social resistance to mixed race offspring. Both Morag's friend Julie and her landlady, Maggie Tefler, express surprise (Julie) and, in Maggie's case, disgust, when they see baby Pique's Metis features for the first time (327, 330).

MacLeod tells Piquette's sad story, from her bout with tuberculosis as a youngster to her marriage to a white man who abandoned her, to her tragic violent death in a fire that razed the Tonnerre family shack. Piquette's story has much narrative impact, but, according to Tracy Ware, has troubling implications. Ware asks whether "white authors reify the indigene" (76) according to prevalent social stereotypes and contends that Laurence's depiction of Piquette in "The Loons" "allows for resistance, which it then finds utterly ineffectual" (80). After "The Loons," Laurence returns to Piquette's story briefly in *The Fire-Dwellers* when Stacey McAindra has a chance meeting with Piquette's sister Valentine. Stacey hears from Valentine how Piquette died along with her two children in the late night fire at their childhood home: the pain in Valentine's memory is not erased by her pragmatic comment that "if I know Piquette, she was stoned out of her mind, most likely" (241).

Piquette's first two appearances were not sufficient for Laurence, and, after *The Fire-Dwellers*, she still cannot leave Piquette's story. My sense is that Piquette somehow haunted Laurence, who, in a letter to her friend Al Purdy, associates *The Diviners* with a sense that "we are haunted by more than our deaths" (Lennox 317). For a writer with a strong sense of social justice such as Laurence, the death of a haunting character like Piquette would not be easily reconciled. If Laurence felt in any way that she had shortchanged this sensitive character, she would have to pick up her pen again with that character in mind. Piquette's story becomes a crucial connection between Jules Tonnerre, who is clearly still troubled by his sister's death years later, and Morag, who, as a local reporter, was sent to the scene the night of the fateful fire. That Laurence in effect brings Piquette back to life in *The Diviners* in the young, hopeful form of Piquette (Pique)

Tonnerre Gunn, daughter of Morag and Jules, is a return to an unfinished story Laurence needed to explicate further. That *The Diviners* ends with Pique heading back to Manawaka to connect with her father's remaining relatives suggests that, through Pique, Laurence gives the first Piquette the resistance denied her in her early appearances in "The Loons" and *The Fire-Dwellers*.

Despite this interpretive continuation of Piquette as Pique, *The Diviners* is, however, Morag Gunn's story, and, in true postmodern novelistic fashion, begins near the story's end. Worried when her eighteen-year-old daughter Pique strikes out on her own, Morag shows typical maternal angst, but, she does not give in to it, and instead, takes refuge in her writing:

> I've got too damn much work in hand to fret over Pique. Lucky me. I've got my work to take my mind off my life. At forty-seven that's not such a terrible state of affairs. If I hadn't been a writer, I might've been a first-rate mess at this point. Don't knock the trade. (12)

In typical Morag style, gruff and pragmatic, she recognizes the strength that being a writer has brought to her mothering style, as well as the influence that being a mother has brought to her writing. Her work distracts her from the state of her life, just as she pours the state of her life into her fictional work. But Morag's writing and life experience does not make her entirely immune to the characteristic motherly concerns. She recognizes what she sees as increased dangers in the world her daughter has fled out into: "the world seems full of more hazards now. Doom all around. . . . I worry. I worry, but can do absolutely sweet bugger-all" (35).

Morag's comments about worrying fit well into Laurence's overall commentary about motherhood in *The Diviners*. Worry, guilt, and motherhood have always been culturally connected, with some mothers often accused of worrying needlessly and other mothers judged for not worrying enough. While giving Morag the strength to live an unusual life, Laurence does not depict the single mother life as idyllic or easy. When Pique becomes ill in England, Morag is thrown into an anxiety-filled situation all parents eventually face. Her internal dialogue illustrates how loneliness sits everywhere in her life:

> when Pique is well, and Morag is writing, and there are sometimes people to talk to, then the fact that she is alone is bearable. . . . when Pique is sick, or when Morag herself is sick and wonders what would happen if anything fatal happened to herself, or when the money is perilously low and Morag, paralyzed with anxiety, cannot write – it is then that she feels the aloneness to be unbearable. (387)

With this passage and its eloquent depiction of parental emotions that can and do occur in any parent's sojourn as child-caregiver, Laurence shows feelings that are not exclusive to mothers, but any parent regardless of gender, class, or partnered status.

Even though she raises her daughter by herself, Morag is not the only parent concerned about Pique. Morag's single parent status does not protect her from having Pique's absent father, Jules, chastise her for "allowing" Pique to head west on her own: "By Jesus, Morag, if she goes out to Vancouver, I'll strangle you" (69). Morag, however, does not accept this charge quietly, retaliating with equal vehemence. Linked by more than parental concerns, Morag and Jules are so intimately connected that long absences and geographical distance between them disappear quickly: they soon absorb themselves in their roles as parents who understand that their child must find an autonomy they cannot provide for her. Through Morag's personal relationships with those close to her, Laurence invests her most feminist mother with an openness that welcomes input from trusted confidants without compromising her independent lifestyle. Through the "lightening of the heart" (120) that comes from hearing her daughter's voice on the telephone, Laurence also invests her most feminist mother with the deep maternal emotions typically associated with being a mother.

Laurence's representation of feminist mothering is well nuanced. As with many of the conundrums associated with pervasive notions of what constitutes appropriate mothering, mothers often find themselves in classic impossible situations that would be referred to in everyday clichéd language as "being between a rock and a hard place": castigated for doing both too much and too little. As Pique grows up, Morag wrestles with the circumstances of the childhood she has provided with her daughter:

> I clobbered her with a hell of a situation to live in, although I never meant to. Okay, maybe everything else clobbered her, too, and I'm not God and I'm not responsible for everything. But I chose to have her, in the first place, and maybe I should've seen it would be too difficult for her. (110)

Here Morag acknowledges that growing up with a mixed race heritage, an absent father, and an unmarried mother who is a famous writer has, while providing Morag with a self-directed life, made for a complicated situation Pique must learn to manage. Although recognizing that she is not responsible for the injustices in the social order her daughter inherits, Morag cannot completely divest herself of guilt and short-sightedness; nevertheless, she stops short of regret, instead puzzling out the complexities of her life with her friend Royland as sympathetic interlocutor.

When Pique challenges her mother's choices by saying "you don't know how it feels" (373), Morag responds with explanation not apology. Laurence fuels the confrontations between Morag and Pique with rising intensity. At one point, Pique even more directly challenges her mother's ability to understand her daughter's particular dilemma: "you've never been called a dirty halfbreed. You've never had somebody tell you your mother was crazy because she lived out here all alone and wrote dirty books and had kooky people coming out of the city to visit" (446). This particular passage, as well as adding depth to the lived conflicts associated with social bias and exclusion associated with Morag and Pique's realities, also anticipates events that occurred a few years after the actual publication of *The Diviners*.

After its publication in 1974, the novel received widespread critical acclaim, with literary critics largely reacting to it positively and Laurence receiving the 1975 Governor General's Award for fiction for it. However, the novel's depiction of a single pregnant woman who raises a child by herself drew vehement critiques from traditionalists. What Laurence refers to in *Dance on the Earth* as "the controversy" (213) affected her deeply: "to my total horror and surprise, *The Diviners* was attacked as being pornographic, blasphemous, not fit to be in the school library or to be taught" (214). This controversy is a topic Laurence deals with quite extensively in her memoir, devoting several pages to its description and longterm aftermath (213-7). Its prominence among the many deep personal issues Laurence chooses to address in her life reflection indicates the deeply felt connection the novel has to both her literary status and her sense of personal accomplishment as an artist.

Certainly Laurence's artistic accomplishment is at least partially a Canadian exploration into how recent and distant memory continues to shape social attitudes now (and by now, I mean now, as well as when Laurence was writing). Depicting how her feisty protagonist dives into her work, Laurence has Morag contemplate the impact of memory on today. Morag recognizes that people often have an erroneous rigid view of the past as that which cannot be changed, and also the paradoxical reality that, as memory exercises its personal research, people "constantly [change] their own past, [recall] it, [revise] it" (70). Closely associated with this contemplation of memory are the time transitions that mark the mother-daughter relationship: Morag's thinks of her daughters as the "harbinger of [her] death, continuer of life" (312), a thought that inevitably leads her into the bank of memories that constitute her immediate and distant past.

Morag's personal forays into her memorybanks also instigate critical reflections about and connections to previously lived social conditions, especially by women. Of the pioneers who cleared and settled the land around her riverside home, Morag sees the amount of hard labour involved:

> The sheer unthinkable back-and-heart-breaking slog. Women working like horses. Also, probably pregnant most of the time. Baking bread in brick ovens, with a loaf in their own ovens. Looking after broods of chickens and kids. Terrible. Appalling. (106)

The stand-alone words "terrible" and "appalling" look and feel as independent as the autonomy Morag fought for so stridently. Laurence uses these words effectively as tonal asides that gesture not only to the difficulties of pioneering life, but also to the stubborn social issues that came out of that time and continue to plague a sometimes apathetic contemporary generation that views feminism as a passé fait accompli and motherhood as a natural female instinct.

As with my investigations into Carol Shields' and Jane Urquhart's fiction, once I started reading Laurence's fiction for links between any feminist subtext and representations of mothering, both those issues began to take over the narratives. Now, with my attentions firmly fixed on feminism and motherhood, I read the entire Manawaka series as an extended commentary about how women struggle to break through the restrictive conventions that surround traditional notions of womanhood, and as a literary contemplation about the complexities involved for individual mothers who attempt to reconcile their lives with the idealized parameters that shape mainstream images of motherhood. Laurence's representations of the maternal in her fictional characters demonstrate the issues Adrienne Rich writes about in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the issues that surround the "pernicious myths" that require "mothers to be at once both superhuman and sub-human" (Atwood "Adrienne Rich" 255).

Rich's transformative text was published in 1976, two years after *The Diviners* made its appearance. In her memoir, Laurence gives no indication that she ever read Rich's book, but the two writers would certainly have seen each other in their works had they engaged in reader-writer encounters. Laurence does, however, refer to another writer who wrote about women's experiences as both writer and mother: Tillie Olsen. The Nebraska-born Olsen, one of the first voices of the American women's movement in the 1960s, is the author of *Silences*, *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Mother to Daughter Daughter to Mother*. In *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence writes about Olsen, women, and writing:

> a woman writer often feels what I believe is termed role conflict. How can you do everything, be everything, at once? So many women writers have, for too much of their professional lives, put themselves and their work last, as women in all areas have been socially conditioned to do over centuries. The best, most poignant description and analysis of such situations are found in Tillie Olsen's heart-rending book, *Silences*. Many married women writers with children have found this multiplicity of roles ultimately unsupportable, and have either stopped writing or left the marriage, almost always taking their children along with them on the unknown and perilous path. Stay or go. The choices are unambiguous. (136)

Speaking about general situations facing women writers in twentieth-century western society, Laurence's own experiences inform her claims that women writers have much to overcome. That their need to work leads them at times on a "perilous path" is an observation that comes from Laurence's own experience as a writing mother, an observation that, not surprisingly, leads her to other writers as she contemplates the telling of her own life story. Over twenty years have passed since Laurence wrote *Dance on the Earth* and over thirty years have elapsed since Olsen's *Silences* was published.

Nevertheless, both works remain highly relevant to continuing contemporary debates, particularly third-wave feminist concerns about being "culturally savvy," postfeminist notions that "feminism has already done its work" (Kavka xi), and ongoing mainstream social debates about whether or not twenty-first century women are dedicated enough to perceived maternal responsibilities.

Laurence is certainly not the first Canadian writer to turn to Tillie Olsen's work. Many have been drawn to the writer who so effectively disputes female silence as natural, and instead reveals it as an "unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot" (6). Olsen's vivid rendition of silence as unnatural provides a context for seeing silencing as the result of external agents that impose silence upon one who would, given the choice, speak whether by voice or pen. For Laurence, silencing produces conflict and causes lived repercussions that she considers unique to women writers. When she turns her late-in-life creative energy to the non-fiction that is her life, Laurence does not leave those conflicts and repercussions behind.

As her memoir unfolds, Laurence shifts often between general commentary to individual reminiscence. After the commentary about the "unambiguous" choice that faced married women writers, she very briefly offers a glimpse of a very difficult choice she had to make in her own life. When faced with the "stay or go" she refers to in the above passage, Laurence chose the latter, leaving her marriage seven years after her second child was born. Although she writes that her ex-husband Jack Laurence "was always patient and understanding about what he conceived of not as his wife's vocation but as a kind of work she was interested in doing" (152), that sentiment changed when Laurence finished the first draft of *The Stone Angel*. She says that she did not want Jack

Laurence to read it. When he did, his reaction explained her reluctance to share her new work with him, yet his negative response seemed secondary to what was happening in Laurence's mind:

> for me it was the most important book I had written, a book on which I had to stake the rest of my life. Strange reason for breaking up a marriage: a novel. I had to go with the old lady, I really did, but at the same time I feel terrible about hurting him (158).

Whether or not this claim that she ended the marriage and did so as a sacrifice for her writing career is shared by others in her life is not part of *Dance on the Earth*. Nevertheless, the parallels between what happens in Laurence's life and what happens to her characters are vividly apparent. Laurence's own version of her determination to leave her marriage resonates with the determination she created in the fictional "old lady" who caused the end of her marriage. Hagar is defiantly strong, rejecting the memories of a mother who was not strong enough, a mother who left her daughter with "the damaging association between women and weakness that Hagar makes throughout most of her life" (Taylor 161). In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar mirrors her creator's life, ending her marriage with a similar stoic pragmatism that conceals the turmoil beneath the surface. Both demonstrate the strength associated with feminist women, often accused of being too aggressive or overly ambitious even in the supposedly gender-neutral relations of today's Western society; both reject the acquiescence associated with the same society's version of motherhood.

Laurence creates distinctive characters who stand out in a social order that promotes sameness. Like their characters, Laurence's narratives are also distinctive and unique: Hagar Shipley seems to die right on the page, narrating her own story right up until the moment of her death. Readers can almost feel her breathing come to an end as Hagar's life winds down: "I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my hands. There. There. And then—" (308). That the end comes with water speaks to the fluidity of both life and death; born out of the amniotic fluid that sheltered her in her mother's body, a body that stopped living as both she and the water left it, Hagar dies full of self-knowledge, but thirsty for more. This fluidity infers the ease with which damaging conditions are culturally condoned, socially shaped, and invisibly overflow generational dikes onto familial floodplains.

Afterword to Chapter Three: A Settler Inheritance

I am puzzled that so many who have written about Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel *say that Hagar Shipley is "everyone's grandmother." Even Laurence herself refers to her cranky ninety-year-old protagonist as everybody's grandmother (Comeau 63). I want to agree with her, because after all, she did create the old lady, but the idea of Hagar as everyone's grandmother simply doesn't sit right with me. I resist it and don't know why.*

I only knew one of my grandmothers. My Icelandic grandmother died young, before I was born, when my own mother was only seventeen years old. My middle name is Louise, the anglicized version of her Icelandic one, Lavisa. She is my missing grandmother, the absent ancestor who regularly haunts my thinking. I have an old black and white picture of her sitting on the bumper of a car wearing Capri pants, little white ankle socks, and high heels. Charming as it is, the photograph does not reveal enough for me, giving no sense of what her voice might have sounded like or what words she would say to me. My mother says she was petite and very talented with a sewing needle and everyone loved her, especially my grandfather, who called her Lou, and was highly protective of her because she had had rheumatic fever when she was a child and consequently always a little frail, but apparently not too frail to give birth to four children.

On the other side of my family, my paternal grandmother had a huge impact on me. I wear her name: Myrl. The spelling is an Irish version of the North American androgynous, and, for me, decidedly unattractive, Merle. I've finally made friends with my name after years of resisting it. People never know what it is. Myrl: it's a weird looking word, and I've often been accused of having a name with no vowel, until the I point out the 'y' and recite the old vowel adage – a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes y. I am the sometimes 'y.'

Over the years of my life, I often wrestled with my ambivalent relationship with my name. I liked that it was different, and I disliked that it was so different. Once I even considered switching to the other grandmother's name, Louise, to make things easier for me. But, that would have been a kind of abandonment and I rejected that idea.

Despite my shifting relationship with my name, I have always liked, and still do, that I have my grandmother's name, although it wasn't until the end of her life that I realized that people had actually called her by our name. When she died and the family gathered together for her funeral, I was even more unsettled than I usually am at funerals. At the beginning of the service, every time the minister mentioned her name, my first thought was that he was talking about me because he kept calling her Myrl. My grandmother was never Myrl to me: she was always Granny.

And Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley is nothing like my Granny, nothing at all. Well, except for the keeping silent part. And possibly the putting on airs part. And maybe the social appearances part. Except for those things, and possibly the crankiness, my grandmother was nothing like Hagar. She was a lady. Well . . . a lady somewhat similar to the lady Jason Currie sent Hagar off to the east to become. But beyond that, my grandmother didn't have the tough spirit of adventure that Hagar has. Well, except for the part where my grandmother would tuck her two small children—my father and his older sister—into her car and drive from Winnipeg to Calgary all by herself. A routine feat today, but in the nineteen-thirties when the Trans-Canada Highway was non-existent, when two ruts in the landscape formed the road, when service stations had yet to be invented, and definitely when women didn't really drive, much less travel alone without male accompaniment in a car for hundreds and hundreds of miles, my *grandmother's western trek would have to be considered an adventure for those tough in spirit.*

Still, except for those vague similarities, my grandmother and Hagar were nothing alike. Except that they both had Celtic ancestry, Hagar being Scottish, and my grandmother being Irish. But that's a huge difference. Everyone knows that the Scots and the Irish don't mix. Well, except that my grandmother married a stoic, authoritarian Scot not unlike Jason Currie. My grandparents were married for almost eighty years, dying within six months of each other, both well into their nineties, Granny going first. In his remaining few months, my grandfather didn't have time to build a stone angel to stand in memory of his wife, but both their personas are etched in the stony foundations that their grandchildren have built their lives on.

But, like I say, Hagar is nothing like my grandmother, and, as I said, the idea of Hagar as a universal grandmother is alien to me, even though when I first read The Stone Angel, *I felt my family hovering around me, and even though every page made me think, I'm glad I didn't come from a place like that. After all, Manawaka is supposed to be Neepawa, but I'm not from Neepawa, I'm from Winnipeg. Yes, they're both in Manitoba, in the middle of this sprawling country, and both have harsh winters and mosquito-infested summers, but really, Winnipeg and Neepawa are miles and miles apart. One is a town that grew into a small city, and one is a city that, in 1968, felt too much like a small town for a young girl fresh out of an unwed mothers home. Ultimately, these two cities stand for the connections between my Granny and Hagar: Hagar as Neepawa, the stoic rural core of my spiritual home, and Granny as Winnipeg, site of simultaneous urban confidence and insecurity. Miles apart, so very different yet so alike,* *both products of a settler culture that remains somehow unsettling, a regenerative past always in flux, its adaptation never complete, and its influences always in revival.*

As I try to see a clear version of my inherited past, I am reminded how generational the phases of life are. Today, only one elegant Scottish cousin and my mother stand in the way of me becoming the oldest person in my extended family. It's strange how inexorably we move up the family ladder, paying at times only dutiful attention to those family members in the older generations, and then increasingly feeling their absences as they drop off one by one. The realization of this slow progression hit me several years ago when, after yet another funeral, one of my sisters commented that we didn't have any more uncles left. At that moment, only too aware that one of the men we had recently lost was our father, we sadly concurred that the men in our family tend to die first. We didn't know at the time that, within a few years, we wouldn't have any more aunts left either. Of the previous generation in our big extended family, my mother is now the last one still walking this earth.

I don't think my mother ever read Margaret Laurence's books. She's not much for fiction other than the short stories that appear in women's magazines. One Christmas several years after I received it as a gift myself, I gave her a copy of Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries. *After all, my mother was born in Manitoba, and grew up in Selkirk, not far from the Stonewall limestone that forms the foundation of Daisy Goodwill's life. My mother was a little taken aback that I would choose to give her a book, and I think she felt a little pressure about getting it, maybe because I had embarked on my grad school work by that time and most of my family were more than a little confused about what I was doing and why.*

Although Mom said she enjoyed Shields' book, that's all she would say. I'm not convinced she actually read it. I've never given my mother a Laurence or an Urquhart book. In fact, I've never given her another book. Well, that's not quite true. One year we had a falling out after finally talking about my first pregnancy and my lost child. We didn't speak to each other for a long time. During our estrangement, I sent her a copy of Ann Petrie's Gone to An Aunt's, *the only book I've ever read about homes for unwed mothers. Almost by return post, the book came back to me so I know for certain that she never read that one. Books weren't going to heal our relationship. We had to do it ourselves, and we did. I learned that it's not a good feeling to be estranged from one's mother, no matter what the family situation is. I have also learned that family situations are always subject to change.*

I was the first in my family to make my mother a grandmother, but she could not celebrate that status until I had my second child. After my burst of childbirthing was over, my sisters took over until my mother eventually was grandmother to eight grandchildren. She was always interested in our children in that distant, not completely responsible but happily proud, grandmotherly way that I often recognized as similar to how our Granny related to us. Only once, at my insistence, did my mother confirm that she did indeed wonder about her ninth grandchild, the one born first that she never even saw in the brief few days I had access to him through a pane of glass.

Two years ago, on a cold autumn day, I came home from campus intending to spend the afternoon working on the second chapter of the first version of my dissertation, a version that was becoming increasingly alien to me. Before settling into my office, I flipped through the day's mail and absentmindedly called up the messages on my *answering machine. A quiet female voice filled my kitchen: "Call this number for an important personal message." At first I thought it was some new telemarketing tactic and I moved to erase it. Just before I hit that button, however, I realized that the phone number had a Manitoba area code, and something made me pause. Not a mysterious something, a very particular something.*

In 1995, I had placed my name on a post-adoption registry website, hoping that if my firstborn child ever decided to look for me he would start there. By 2004, I had reconciled myself to the idea that this would probably never happen. After all, he was a thirty-six year old man by then, possibly long past the point of needing to find a birth mother long gone from his life. I called the number: a woman with one of the most soothing voices I've ever heard took my return call and said quietly that the son I gave birth to in 1968 wanted to make contact with me.

In my mind, that moment has become one of those slow-motion real-life montages often associated with car crashes or near-death experiences. Instead of a hurricane of emotions, I felt an overwhelming rational calm. The woman with the soothing voice asked how I would like to handle the situation. I replied that I would prefer to exchange letters first, because I'm better with the written word than the spoken word in awkward situations. As it turned out, my son felt exactly the same way. Through the social worker, we exchanged names and addresses.

I wrote him a letter that afternoon: it is the only finished piece of writing I have ever produced that I did not revise several times. That letter poured out of me intact as if I had been working on it for years, and in a sense I had. I told him exactly what had happened back in 1968 and why. I told him what had happened in my life (the cheerfully *abridged version) since that time and what my life was like now. I told him that every year his birthday was a day of yearning for me. I told him I had a picture of him at three days old in my night table drawer.*

In a coincidence of symbiosis, my son and I received each other's letters on exactly the same day. His to me was charmingly distant and looked almost like a resume. He included pictures of himself as a child. They blurred as I pored over each one of them. Just as I had done, my son had included his e-mail address. After I had absorbed the letter and his pictures, I went to my computer to put his address in my directory, and a message instantly popped up from him.

In a steady stream, we exchanged words and pictures across cyberspace for the next few weeks. In his wedding pictures, I was stunned to see a younger version of my father's face staring out at me. Our reunion took over my life. I couldn't think about anything else for months. My dissertation lay untouched in its pile, glaring at me in its abandonment, me looking back at it questioningly. What was it about again?

When he was ready, my son determined that it was time for us to meet in person. I arranged flights as soon as possible. My husband and I flew to Winnipeg and waited for a knock on our hotel room door. And then there he was, his wife by his side. I don't remember the words, just the big long hug. As the four of us had dinner together, talk was constant with no strained silences. The next morning, I met his parents. His mother brought me a rose and we both cried as we greeted each other. More big long hugs. And stories. The stories just tumbled out. We couldn't tell them fast enough. His stories. My stories. Stories about his childhood. Stories about siblings he didn't yet know, but would soon.

Now we're working on our story. He has done well in life, a university graduate with a successful career in the financial world. After the initial excitement of reunion settled, we gradually began the task of getting to know each other. At times, especially because we live in different cities, we seemed to move slowly in that effort; at other times, we moved too fast. Once we determined that we had both survived the circumstances of his birth and gone on to live productive lives, we had to go further. I think he was taken aback to discover that his birth mother was, gulp . . . a feminist, just as I was taken aback to discover that my long-lost child was, gulp . . . a conservative.

From my perspective, it's hard to know how to be an extra mother in a grown man's life, but I'm working on it. From his perspective, it's hard to find a place in a big raucous family that suddenly wants you to be part of it, but he's working on it. When they were in their early twenties, I had told my children about their lost brother. I don't really know why I did; I just felt they should know that somewhere out there they had another sibling. When it came time to tell them he had made contact, the moment was a positive one; they were so pleased and eager to meet their brother. I knew that our relationship might become strained at some future point, but for the moment, all was well. First meetings took place with convivial and even loving contact. I organized a big family lunch where he met all the relations, siblings, nieces, nephews, and, my mother. I put him in touch with his birth father, and the same thing happened: a big family waited to know him and gather him into their midst. Unaware of their father's first-born child, and younger than my three, my son's new siblings on his birth father's side were somewhat less than enchanted with his sudden appearance. Yet, no doors are closed. Everyone involved is involved: all of my son's extended families are all working on it.

A satisfying bonus is that my mother finally has a picture of her eldest grandchild hanging on the wall along with the other eight. Grandmothers need the photo galleries of their grandchildren to be complete, even occasionally cranky ones.

Conclusion: Feminism, Motherhood, and Me

Many people think they can define feminism, but their understanding comes from media or popular culture versions that are almost invariably negative. Many people think they know what being a mother means, but view motherhood uncritically as either a warm fuzzy ideal or a stern rebuke, depending on their own relationships with their mothers. Many people think of an autobiography as the only credible version of a true story, unassailable because of its authoritative source. But many people would not think of writing their own autobiography, seeing it as a self-indulgent exercise that would have little cultural value. In all the above cases, many people would not only be erroneous, but also largely unaware of the ideologies that operate to inform their thinking, almost invisibly rationalizing and justifying the seemingly inevitable, immutable structures, institutions, and practices of our lives. A word as big and murky as the concept it stands for, ideology masquerades as a common sense acceptance of things as they are.

Current debates in popular culture about feminism and motherhood reveal the conflicts that swirl around and between these abstract entities. Tracing the sources of those conflicts is a bit like unraveling a cable-knit sweater, filled with improbable twists and confusing pouches, to discover one long piece of yarn. Rather than thinking of that one piece of yarn as representing a single entity, I think of it as standing for the relationship between the elements that make up the whole. The relationship an individual has with both feminism and motherhood depends heavily on that individual's life location: the identity a person inherits at birth, the geographical site at which a life begins and where that life goes from there. As lives progress, individual life locations are destined to result in collisions between the self and its cultural moment. Those collisions are where learning happens; they are also where stories begin and end. Because fact and fiction go together—facts need stories, stories need imagination, and imagination springs from the facts of the imaginer's lived experience—creative works are strongly influenced by who their creators are/were and what their potential autobiographies would say should they be written. If paired together as narrative characters, feminism and motherhood would be intimate antagonists and their stories would be, whether fiction or autobiography, autoethnographic texts portraying particular cultural moments that shape individual lives and entire communities.

At this early twenty-first century cultural moment in Western society, I see feminism as in a time of transition: other than proclamations of its apparent demise, little vividly visible feminist activity makes noise on the popular culture front. Motherhood and mothering, on the other hand, are currently in a period of intense attention, with disparate and divisive debates about maternal practices and traditions appearing often on bookstore shelves and in daily media. Evidence of the many current maternal conflicts is found in the prevalence of books and articles about appropriate mothering, and by the difficulties many women face in choosing when and if they want to become mothers. Although media reports regularly warn that their fertility may be diminished, many young women today decide to delay motherhood until later in their lives when their careers and personal lives are more established, while others choose early motherhood instead of a career, a choice most second-wave feminists would view as a step back towards Betty Friedan's "problem with no name."[1]

---

[1] Two very recently published books speak to both these approaches. In the Saturday, May 12, 2007 issue, *The Globe and Mail*'s book section reports that Leslie Bennetts' *The Feminine Mistake* describes the new

Canadian feminist Doris Anderson commented that, when Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, Canadian women had already been reading feminist writing in Chatelaine magazine for several years (5). The border that separates Canada and the United States often seems to disappear in terms of popular culture, but frequently re-appears as a political and cultural division. Although Canadian attitudes are certainly influenced by the US, the history of Canadian social democracy informs a different feminist history. American second-wave feminism grew largely from liberal feminist sensibilities, whereas in Canada, mid-twentieth-century feminism was more socially motivated. Different developing histories, for the US a revolutionary republic and for Canada a colonial/settler nation, and different attitudes towards religion and class have influenced approaches towards contemporary women's issues. The second-wave of the feminist movement played out differently north and south of our long border and so does the focus on mothering theory.

Canadian feminists and maternal theorists have moved to the international leading edge of mothering and motherhood investigations. Canada's innovative organization, the *Association for Research on Mothering* (*ARM*), is one venue that has and continues to allow this important work to take place. Moreover, Canadian writers and thinkers who focus on feminism and mothering have a wealth of Canadian creative writers to draw from. My search for particularly Canadian representations of motherhood did not take long.

Perhaps because Canada has so many strong women writers who draw from the multicultural social order in which their sensibilities and talents were forged, mothers are

---

trend for women to "opt out of careers in favour of motherhood," while Peggy Orenstein's *Waiting for Daisy* depicts how a "respected feminist in early middle age . . . descend[s] into baby fever" (D8).

everywhere in written Canadian art. While I have focused this work on three novelists who write from similar life locations, future explorations into creative representations of motherhood will find rich maternal material in poetry, drama, non-fiction, and autobiography.

The importance of productive communication and cohesive dialogue between feminism and motherhood is more imperative than ever. However, that dialogue need not seek a universal consensus or plan: such a consensus is an impossibility, as we learned from the first two waves of feminism. Today's goals must be to learn from and work with the complexities of all specific female and mothering situations, to understand the histories and hear the stories, even those stories we have heard over and over again because they often have something new to tell us. The subtexts of individual lives, whether ordinary or exceptional, conventional or transgressive, provide critical information for today's perspectives and important counsel for the future directions of both feminist and maternal activity.

Jane Urquhart, Carol Shields, and Margaret Laurence remain prominent names in the Canadian literature landscape. All three writers bring to their works the particular conditioning of their lives, the social expectations of their inherited cultural environments, and the learned conventions of being maternally feminine and femininely maternal. Although their novels have not been the focus of a great deal of recent feminist examination, their works are richly informed representations of how middle-class white women lived and interpreted Canadian feminism in the second half of the twentieth century. Rather than viewing their works as products of an over-privileged group of white, middle-class women who could not see the wider ramifications of patriarchal ideology on women's lives because they were so involved in their own, their writing offers opportunities to investigate how these women understood and reacted both to feminism and the mothering expectations of their times.

Many women of these women, their lives invested in traditional ideological conventions, turned their backs on feminism. Nevertheless, they lived under and perpetuated the restrictive limitations of patriarchal motherhood. To effectively move into the future, feminism needs those women. One way to reach them is through story, indeed, through productive investigation of everyone's stories, including theirs.

Productive investigation moves away from the pattern of one stream of feminist thought critiquing another – productive investigation moves away from Western society's general tendency to engage in mother-blame; productive investigation focuses instead on the social and cultural conditions that still impede women's lives; examining the fiction of Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, and Jane Urquhart in reverse chronological order reflects the shift towards social conservatism in the latter part of the twentieth- and first part of the twenty-first centuries in North America. Laurence's feminism is more socialist than the other two, perhaps reflective of the origins of Canadian feminism in the early 1960s. Shields' feminism is a liberal feminism that found its sources in her sheltered Illinois upbringing and the family she created with her husband during the same years that she wrote her stories. Urquhart's is a rejected feminism characteristic of the postfeminist disillusioned by either the flawed and failed objectives of second-wave feminism or the perceived public backlash against it.

Of the three, Laurence's fictional representations of mothers are more transgressive, more aggressively resistant, and more audacious in how they subvert the restrictions that conventional femininity and traditional motherhood place on them. Laurence dismisses feminine goodness, having her characters abandon the pretensions surrounding it; Shields questions goodness as an essential domestic, indeed maternal, quality; however, neither Laurence nor Shields engage with these feminine conventions as pessimistically as Urquhart's more recent representations of domesticity and motherhood as fraught with restrictions and peril for women.

The acquiescence traditional motherhood has demanded from women is a common theme in their collective work, one that these three writers represent differently. In Laurence's work, Hagar Shipley resists graceful acquiescence, as do Stacey McAindra and Morag Gunn; in Shields, Daisy Goodwill Flett and Reta Winters manage any resistance they have to acquiescence within their conventional life patterns; and in Urquhart, expected female acquiescence often binds her maternal characters, such as Mrs. Frears and Helga Becker, uncomfortably to their lives. Although female submissiveness is not a direct topic, in interviews with all three writers, they speak of the influences and thinking that motivated them to write and thus inform their artistic legacies. Those legacies are the results of lived and imagined lives; the life stories that Laurence, Shields, and Urquhart depict in their fiction are imagined, but imagined from the lived conditions of their own lives, the perceived and unperceived influences that seep into their published works.

The time has come (again) to build stronger alliances between women from every sector of contemporary Western society. One way to do that is through stories: writing them, reading them, hearing them, and talking about them. Stories open doors and minds. Reading many of them will be difficult, but probably not as difficult as writing them. Of those who decide to write their lived stories, some will be at ease with themselves at the outset, an ease that will no doubt be challenged along the way, as the episodes of their lives, both illuminating and humiliating, present themselves for interpretation. Others will feel trepidation from the very moment they feel those urges to put their lives into words.

My experience of writing moments of my life into my academic work has brought me to understand that, like feminism and motherhood, the two cannot be separated. What draws my critical attention are those issues in particular that evoke passionate response in me and are inevitably, if subconsciously at first, connected to landmark moments in my life, moments of both isolation and despair. These emerge less as elements related to my limited insular sense of agency, and more as the effects of social and cultural causes.

When my dissertation work came to the point that my life outside the academy became integral to its progress, I found writing in a split narrative to be uncomfortable; however, that unease was not as uncomfortable as writing only in the traditional scholarly voice, my personal voice banished to a silent undercurrent. Allowing it to participate intellectually in my academic process has been both a relief from restraint and a richly informative experience, though not without its pitfalls.

Writing each remembered personal episode brings a narrative dilemma for autobiographers. Those past experiences we can laugh about, or use to illuminate understanding, become part of the larger narrative; those we prefer not to remember, perhaps have done our best to avoid remembering, we resist wrapping words around. They remain holes, the lacuna of a life. Every life story is a rough write from start to finish; thus, autobiographies are culturally informative and important to investigate alongside the work of fictions that tell their "true" stories.

In September of the year 2000, I looked in the mirror and saw an old grad student: a fifty-year old grad student to be exact. I soon discovered that life in graduate studies was challenging and stimulating, exciting and demoralizing, confidence-building and anxiety-producing. I also discovered that my studies caused havoc in my personal life. With every theory I read, I became angrier. With every new insight into the injustices of the past, I became more strident. With every paper I produced, I became more obsessed with making sure that everyone around me knew that we had all been indoctrinated to accept flawed ideals in our lives. The more I read, the more I could not shed the notion that most people are puppets to the status quo. I argued with my husband and my friends; I alienated my sisters and caused my nieces and nephews to look at me with not a little fear; I lectured anyone who would listen about the evils built into the very substance of our society. I lashed out in all directions as I struggled to get through a maze of reading that stimulated me in my work but stymied me in my personal life. Not surprisingly, I got pretty lonely for a while. While I developed a few close relationships among my grad student colleagues, as someone who seemed almost elderly to most of them, I wasn't comfortable joining in the evening bar gatherings. Mostly, I taught, went to the library, and disappeared back to my home office to study and write.

Off campus, I stopped using the word "husband," rejecting its connotations of authority and control. I began referring to my spouse as my partner instead, which always confused him. He thought I was talking about someone else or that I had entered into a new business arrangement I hadn't told him about. To his considerable credit, he never asked me to quit my studies, and was always ready to give me the support and *space I needed even though he found my new passions difficult to deal with. For a few years we just avoided talking about my work.*

During this time, it seemed that my children were the only people in my immediate sphere who didn't think that going back to university had permanently ruined me. In fact, my trio of young adults were calm, perhaps somewhat bemused by it all. Indeed, they seemed proud of what I was doing and were always steadfast in their support for me. Whenever I asked them how they felt about having a university grad student for a mother, they replied as a unit: go Mom go. It's not that I was asking permission; it's that I wanted their approval. They gave it to me unconditionally and their mandate helped to give me the energy I needed to overcome obstacles.

And so, for the next six years, I retreated daily to the cluttered home office I claimed as my own room. In the middle of the night when sleep eluded me, that's where I went. This room gradually became very full, stuffed with overloaded shelves, boxes of books, binders of finished writing, and piles of notebooks through which I often searched frantically looking for verification about some apparently crucial thought that thrust itself unexpectedly into my mind. Along with the clutter, I acquired a sense of urgency. The temporal shape of my life had changed. Where I once felt the time of my life stretching out before me, I now felt time pressed. So much to read. So much to think about. I resisted the constant academic pressure to choose and specialize in one particular corner of the discipline. Whenever anyone asked me what my "area" was, I cringed inside and never gave the same answer twice. I wanted to try different responses to see how they sounded out loud. These years were a roller-coaster ride, a ride I needed *to take to find what should have been patently visible to me at the beginning, a ride I had to endure in order to see the obvious with informed perspective rather than raw reaction.*

Overwhelmed by theory, I dove into fiction, a feast of fiction that almost paralyzed me permanently. After I read Gabrielle Roy and Nicole Brossard, I wanted to study French-Canadian writing; after I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Julia Alvarez, I wanted to study Latin-American literature; after I read Wole Soyinka and Nawal El Saadawi, I wanted to study African writing. I couldn't decide and I couldn't stop reading. When I read Oscar Wilde, I wanted to study Victorianism; when I read Mary Wollstonecraft, I wanted to investigate the women writers of Romanticism; when I read Beowulf, I even toyed with the idea of Old English studies. I was lost at sea. With my mind reeling and my balance gone, I decided to sail for home, back to my century, back to writing from my country.

But there my dilemma only got worse. I read Michael Ondaatje, Dionne Brand, Thomas King, Beatrice Culleton Moisonier, Hiromi Goto, Eden Robinson, Kerri Sakamoto, Rohinton Mistry. The works are complex, tantalizing: they enriched my thinking and added to my confusion. Although I knew I could become informed about any focus I chose for my work, I was worried: how could I credibly take my future work further without having the lived experience to bring the intimacy of communal knowledge into my claims? While recognizing that a writer and thinker does not have to have experienced every life instance she puts into her work, I could not see a clearing where could I plant my flag of credibility. My life was ordinary, I thought. My experience range is bland, I thought.

And that's when I got off my roller-coaster. That's when I realized that being a grad student not only expands one's life, but can also undermine it. I scolded myself. You have lived an expansive life, lived widely within the framework of who you are: a middle-aged, middle-class, white, heterosexual woman. And there was my answer. I went back to writers who were like me. Knowing that having choices is a subjective luxury available to me, I returned to the work of writers who had lived or were living lives similar to mine to read for how they handled the enviable dilemma of having too many choices.

Choosing an academic path as a "Canadianist" was a direction I could live with, and I started working on defining a project. However, I was still drawn to the full range of my chosen discipline, still wanted to find a mix that would allow me to reach out of my specialty box. While reading Jane Urquhart's work, I came upon what I thought was a unique solution. I would ground myself in contemporary Canadian English fiction written by women and I would use intertextuality as my method of investigation. I could stand in the present, in my known world, and use my intertextual research to romp through time and space.

Urquhart's novels, especially her early ones, are particularly open to this approach and I was exhilarated for a while. When Robert Browning appeared as a character in The Whirlpool, *I jumped to his Victorian works; when Urquhart's version of Browning reflect on the influence of Percy Bysshe Shelley, I jumped back to the age of the Romantics. On an intertextual high, I took one literal and many imaginative leaps across the Atlantic Ocean: I put myself in Walter Allward's Vimy Ridge, Tintoretto's Venice, and Bronte's Haworth moors. I was excited about my project. A travel enthusiast both literally and figuratively, I saw that, just as I had "traveled" with Urquhart, I could* *also go to Africa with Margaret Laurence and to England with Carol Shields' Gill family. As a method, intertextuality was fascinating, even exotic. I dove into my Urquhart work, and it progressed well for a while. Soon, however, I realized that, as a method, intertextuality seemed always to move in circles: I was having trouble making it lead me to conclusive reasoning or productive results. I needed another direction.*

I looked around my office at the books that spilled off the overloaded shelves onto the desk top and into piles scattered all over the floor. Somewhere in there was a project. I just had to find it. I began with a dictionary, an approach I often use when I don't know what to do next. Sometimes I like to look up words that are so commonplace hardly anyone would ever need to use a dictionary for their ordinary meanings. One afternoon, as I wandered from words like "boy," "girl," "male," "female," "masculine," "feminine," the phone rang. My daughter, a biologist working on a field study in the US, called to say that she had saved yet another desert tarantula from certain death on an Arizona highway. Resisting the urge to ask how her hold on life may have been challenged by either the tarantula or other Arizona desert highway traffic, I simply relaxed into the sound of her voice. After we hung up, I felt a peace previously absent from my afternoon. In the wash of that moment, I looked up the word "mother."

What I found intrigued me, and made me newly conscious of something I have known unconsciously for a long time: "mother" is a word loaded with loyalties and angst, connectedness and conflict, a word that inspires all known emotions, a word that invokes a range of values and beliefs both deeply personal and highly political. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary *defines being a mother as a "quality or condition . . .that gives rise to another." Becoming a mother, then, gives rise to the condition of* *motherhood, defined, also by* The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, *as "the state or condition of being a mother" or having the "qualities or attributes characteristic of a mother," as well as "having an inherent goodness or justness that is obvious or cannot be disputed." With my dictionary open on my lap, I thought about these definitions and knew that this official connection between motherhood and goodness can and must be disputed. I also knew that such a dispute would bring howls of protest from almost all sources, both in and outside of academia.*

Moreover, I realized that being a mother was instrumental in bringing me to my academic work. The three children I raised kept me going during the toughest days with their consistently unfettered and uncomplicated support. And, somewhat ironically, the child I didn't raise led me to my focus. My oldest son came back into my life in October, 2004. On a dreary cold fall day, I set my then-floundering dissertation work aside to write him a letter. I used his real name for the first time, composed my thoughts in an astonishingly short period of time, and mailed my letter to his newly acquired address. Afterwards, I sat at my desk for several hours and something in me shifted. Suddenly I knew what I had to write about. I knew on that day, for the first time, that I'm not a late feminist. I knew that I became a feminist on a dark May night in 1968 when I gave birth to my first child alone in a big crowded hospital. I knew at last that my feminism stems in large part from the invisibility society demanded for unwed mothers back then; and I knew that my sense of agency was born in a social order that dictated no one should be there to hold the hand of a frightened eighteen-year-old girl in labour. On that snowy October afternoon, I knew for the first time that feminism and motherhood are inevitably connected, like fetus and placenta. I knew that day that my dissertation must be about *motherhood and that it must be about feminism. And I knew that it would be a dissertation no one could write but me.*

Bibliography

Abbey, Sharon. "Researching Motherhood as a Feminist: Reflecting on my Own Experiences." Mothering and Motherhood: Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. 1.1 (Spring/Summer 1999): 45-55.

Abrams, M. H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 6th Ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.

Alcoff, Linda Martin. "What Should White People Do?" Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World. Eds. Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 262-82.

Alcott, Louisa May. Little Women. 1869. ed. Anne Hiebert Alton. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press Ltd., 2001.

Allen, Graham. Intertextuality. London: Routledge, 2000.

Anderson, Doris. Rebel Daughter: An Autobiography. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996.

Anderson, Linda. Autobiography. London: Routledge, 2001.

Anderson, Marjorie. "Foreward." Dropped Threads 3: Beyond the Small Circle. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2006. ix-xii.

--- "Interview With Carol Shields." Prairie Fire: A Canadian Magazine of New Writing. 16.1 (Spring 1995): 139-50.

Ang, Ien. "I'm a feminist but . . . 'Other' women and postnational feminism." Transitions: New Australian Feminisms. Ed. Barbara Cain and Rosemary Pringle. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 57-73.

Anstruther, Ian. Coventry Patmore's Angel. London: Haggerston Press, 1992.

Association for Research on Mothering (ARM). Sept. 10, 2007. http://www.yorku.ca/arm/

Atwood, Margaret. "Adrienne Rich: Of Woman Born." Second Words. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 254-258.

--- "The Curse of Eve – Or, What I learned in School." Second Words. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 215-228.

--- "On Being a Woman Writer: Paradoxes and Dilemmas." Second Words. Toronto: Anansi, 1982. 190-204.

Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel." The Dialogic Imagination. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 259-422.

Baum, Rosalie Murphy. "Self-alienation of the Elderly in Margaret Laurence's Fiction." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 1996. 153-160.

Beckman-Long, Brenda. "*The Stone Angel* as a Feminine Confessional Novel." Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001. 47-66.

Besner, Neil K. "Introduction." Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life. Winnipeg: Prairie Fire Press, Inc. 9-13.

--- "Introduction." Prairie Fire: A Canadian Magazine of New Writing. 16.1 (Spring 1995): 5.

Blades, Joan, and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner. The Motherhood Manifesto: What America's Moms Want – And What to Do About It. New York: Nation Books, 2006.

Boyko-Head, Christine. "Laura Secord Meets the Candyman: The Image of Laura Secord in Popular Culture." Slippery Pastimes: Reading the Popular in Canadian Culture. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002. 61-79.

Brady, Ann P. Pompilia: A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's *The Ring and The Book*." Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1988.

Brandt, Di. Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature. Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1993.

Briganti, Chiara. "Fat, Nail clippings, Body Parts, or the Story of Where I Have Been: Carol Shields and Auto/Biography." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 175-99.

Brody, Miriam. "Introduction of Mary Wollstonecraft – Life and Writings." A Vindication of the Rights of Women. By Mary Wollstonecraft. 1792. London: Penguin Books, 1992. ix-lxxiv.

Broughton, Noelle. Margaret Laurence: A Gift of Grace: A Spiritual Autobiography. Toronto: Women's Press, 2006.

Brownmiller, Susan. In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution. New York: Random

House, Inc., 1999.

Brydon, Diana. "Silence, Voice and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women." Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence. Ed. Kristjana Gunnars. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. 183-205.

Buss, Helen. "Abducting Mary and Carol: Reading Carol Shields's *Swann* and the Representation of the Writer Through Theories of Biographical Recognition." English Studies in Canada. 23.4 (December 1997): 427-41.

--- Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

--- "Reading Margaret Laurence's Life Writing: Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Subjectivity for a White Female Critic." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 39-58.

Caplan, Paula J. The New Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Canton, Jeffrey. "Ghosts in the Landscape: Jane Urquhart." The Power to Bend Spoons: Interviews with Canadian Novelists. Ed. Beverley Daurio. Toronto: Mercury, 1998. 194-99.

Chesler, Phyllis. The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

Chodorow, Nancy. "Introduction." The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. 3-10.

Coger, Greta M. K. "Margaret Laurence's Manawaka: A Canadian Yoknapatawpha." Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence. Ed. Colin Nicholson. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. 228-46.

--- "Introduction." ed. Greta M. K. Coger. New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 1996. xvii-xxviii.

Comeau, Paul. Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005.

Cook, Méira. "Becoming the Mother: Constructions of the Maternal in *The Diviners*." Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001. 81-98.

Crittenden, Ann. The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001.

Cruikshank, Julia. Whirlpool Heights: The Dream-House on the Niagara River. London: Allen and Unwin, 1915.

Daly, Brenda O. and Maureen T. Reddy, eds. "Introduction." Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities. Knoxville, TENN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991. 1-18.

De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. 1949. Trans. H. M. Parshley. Intro. Deirdre Bair. New York: Random House, Inc., 1989.

DiQuinzio, Patrice. The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Douglas, Ann. Canuck Chicks and Maple Leaf Mamas: Women of the Great White North: A Celebration of Canadian Women. Toronto: McArthur and Co., 2002.

Douglas, Susan J., and Meredith W. Michaels. The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women. New York: Free Press, 2004.

Dowd, Maureen. Are Men Necessary?: When Sexes Collide. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005.

Eagleton, Mary. "Finding a Female Tradition." Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 1-39.

--- "What's the Matter?: Authors in Carol Shields' Short Fiction." Canadian Literature. 186. (Autumn 2005): 70-84.

Easingwood, Peter. "The Realism of Laurence's Semi-Autobiographical Fiction." Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence. Ed. Colin Nicholson. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. 119-32.

Eden, Edward. "Introduction." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 3-15.

Eller, Cynthia. The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

Ellerby, Janet Mason. Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women's Memoir. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

Ellis, Carolyn. "Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally About Our Lives." Representation and the Text: Re-Framing the Narrative Voice. Eds. William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. 115-39.

Ellman, Mary. Thinking About Women. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968.

Fabre, Michel. "Words and the World: The Diviners as an Exploration of the Book of Life." A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. 247-69.

Faludi, Susan. "Introduction: Blame It on Feminism." Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. New York: Doubleday, 1991. ix-xxiii.

Ferguson, Moira. "Introduction: Background and History." First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799. Bloomington, IND: Indiana University Press, 1985. 1-50.

Ferri, Laura. "Atmosphere: An Interview with Jane Urquhart." Descant 109. 31:2 (Summer 2000). 146-156.

Fetterley, Judith. "Reading about Reading: "A Jury of Her Peers," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "The Yellow Wallpaper."" Gender and Reading:Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts. Ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.147-164.

Finney, Gail. "Ibsen and Feminism." The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen. Ed. James McFarlane. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 89-105.

Freiwald, Bina. “Of Selfsame Desire: Patmore’s The Angel in the House.” Texas Studies in Literature and Language. 30.4 (Winter 1988): 538-561.

Foucault, Michel. “What is Enlightenment?” The Foucault Reader. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 32-50.

Friday, Nancy. My Mother/My Self: The Daughter’s Search for Identity. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1977.

Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. 1963. Intro. Anna Quindlen. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Fulton, Keith Louise. “Feminism and Humanism: Margaret Laurence and the ‘Crisis of Imagination.’” Crossing the River: Essays In Honour of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. 99-120.

Gallop, Jane. Anecdotal Theory. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Gamble, Sarah. “Filling the Creative Voice: Narrative Dilemmas in *Small Ceremonies*, the *Happenstance* Novels, and *Swann*.” Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 39-59.

--- “Postfeminism.” The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism. Ed. Sarah Gamble. New York: Routledge, 2000. 43-54.

Giardini, Anne. “Reading My Mother.” Prairie Fire: A Canadian Magazine of Writing. 16.1 (Spring 1995): 6-12.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship.” Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary

Theory and Criticism. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 21-32.

Gillis, Stacy, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford. "Introduction." Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 1-6.

Gilmore, Leigh. The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview." Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency. New York: Routledge, 1994. 1-29.

Godard, Barbara. "Caliban's Revolt." Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence. Ed. Colin Nicholson. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. 208-227.

--- "Feminism And/As Myth: Feminist Literary Theory Between Frye and Barthes." Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal. 16.2 (1990): 3-21.

--- "Introduction." Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing. Ed. Barbara Godard. Toronto: ECW Press, 1987. i-xi.

--- "Sleuthing: Feminists Re/Writing the Detective Novel." Signature: Journal of Theory & Canadian Literature. 1 (Summer 1989): 45-70.

Goertz, Dee. "Treading the Maze of *Larry's Party*." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 2003. 230-54.

Gordon, Tuula. Feminist Mothers. Houndmills, UK: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1990.

Green, Fiona Joy. "Developing a Feminist Motherline: Reflections on a Decade of Feminist Parenting." Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering: Mothering and Feminism. 8:1/2 (Winter/Summer 2006). 7-20.

Greer, Germaine. The Female Eunuch. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970.

Gunnars, Kristjana. "Listening: Laurence's Women." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ed. David Staines. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 121-127.

--- "Preface." Crossing the River: Essays In Honour of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. vii-xvi.

Hamilton, Susan. "Introduction." Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors:Victorian Writing by Women on Women. Ed. Susan Hamilton. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1995. 9-17.

Hammill, Faye. "Carol Shields's 'Native Genre' and the Figure of the Canadian Author." Journal of Commonwealth Literature. 31.2 (1996): 87-99.

--- "Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, and 'That Moodie Bitch.'" The American Review of Canadian Studies. 29 (Spring 1999): 67-91.

--- "*The Republic of Love* and Popular Romance." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 61-83.

--- "Review Essay: 'My Own Life Will Never Be Enough For Me': Carol Shields as Biographer." The American Review of Canadian Studies. 32.1 (Spring 2002): 143-148.

Hamovitch, Mitzi. "The Subversive Voice in The Fire-Dwellers." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 1996. 173-177.

Hancock, Geoffrey. "An Interview with Jane Urquhart." Canadian Fiction Magazine. 55 (1986). 23-40.

Hansson, Heidi. "Biography Matters: Carol Shields, *Mary Swann*, A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Deborah Crombie, *Dreaming of the Bones*." Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies. 58.5 (2003): 353-70.

Hauge, Hans. "The Novel Religion of Margaret Laurence." Crossing the River: Essays In Honour of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. 121-132

Hays, Sharon. The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996.

Henry, Astrid. "Introduction." Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 1-15.

Hermansson, Casie. Reading Feminist Intertextuality Through Bluebeard Stories. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001.

Heywood, Leslie L. ed. The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism. Volume 1. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Hodgson-Wright, Stephanie. "Early Feminism." The Routledge Critical Dictionary of

Feminism and Postfeminism. Ed. Sarah Gamble. New York: Routledge, 2000. 3-15.

Holland, Jack. Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2006.

Hollenberg, Donna Krolik. "An Interview with Carol Shields." Contemporary Literature. 39:3 (Fall 1998). 339-355.

Hollows, Joanne, and Rachel Moseley. Feminism in Popular Culture. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2006.

Homans, Margaret. Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Howells, Coral Ann. "Writing By Women." The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 194-215.

Hunt, Celia, and Fiona Sampson. Writing: Self and Reflexivity. London: Palgrave, 2006.

Hutcheon, Linda. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. New York & London: Routledge, 1988.

"Irony." Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. 572-3.

Jackson, Marni. http://www.marnijackson.com/books/index.html. Sept. 24, 2007.

--- The Mother Zone. 1992. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002.

--- Pain: The Fifth Vital Sign. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2002.

Jeremiah, Emily. "Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature, and Ethics." Mothering and Literature: Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. 4:2 (Fall/Winter 2002). 7-16.

Johnson, Lisa. "'She Enlarges on the Available Materials': A Postmodernism of Resistance in *The Stone Diaries*." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 201-29.

Kaplan, Caren. "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects." De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Kavka, Misha. "Introduction." Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century. Eds. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. (ix-xxvi).

Kertzer, Jon. "That House in Manawaka": Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992.

King, James. The Life of Margaret Laurence. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada,1997.

Kirsch, Gesa E. Women Writing the Academy: Audience, Authority, and Transformation. Carbondale, SI: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993.

Kolodny, Annette. "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism." Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism. Revised Ed. Eds. Robyn R.

Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 171-190.

Kristeva, Julia. "Stabat Mater." 1977. The Kristeva Reader. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986. 160-186.

Ladd-Taylor Molly, and Lauri Umansky. "Introduction." "Bad Mothers": The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 1-28.

Laurence, Margaret. A Bird in the House. 1970. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1989.

--- Dance on the Earth: A Memoir. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1989.

--- The Diviners. 1974. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988.

--- The Fire-Dwellers. 1969. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988.

--- A Jest of God. 1966. Afterword by Margaret Atwood. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988.

--- "Roots and Continuities." Margaret Laurence. Ed. W. H. New. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1977. 12-16.

--- "A Statement of Faith." A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. 56-60.

--- The Stone Angel. 1964. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Inc. 1988.

--- "Ten Years' Sentences." Margaret Laurence. Ed. W. H. New. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1977. 17-23.

Lennox, John. Margaret Laurence – Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters: Selected Correspondence. Ed. John Lennox. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993.

--- "The Spirit and the Letter: The Correspondence of Margaret Laurence." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 7-22.

Lindberg, Laurie. "Wordsmith and Woman: Morag Gunn's Triumph Through Language." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. 187-201.

Marshall, Joyce. "Margaret Laurence: A Reminiscence." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 163-8.

"Maternal Feminism." Time Links. September 10, 2007. http://timelinks.merlin.mb.ca/referenc/db0015.htm

McClung, Nellie. In Times Like These. 1915. Intro. Veronica Strong-Boag. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.

McFadden, Deanna. "Interview with Jane Urquhart." 2003. A Week of Remembrance: History Television. October 24, 2003. http://www.historytelevision.ca/archives/remembrance/interviewJaneUrquhart

McMullen, Lorraine. "Introduction." Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers. Ed. Lorraine McMullen. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990. 1-5.

Mellor, Anne K. "Introduction: Romanticism, Gender and Genre." Romanticism and Gender. New York: Routledge, 1993. 1-11.

Mellor, Winifred M. "'The Simple Container of Our Existence': Narrative Ambiguity in Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*." Studies in Canadian Literature. 20.2 (1995): 96-110.

Middleton, Amy. "Mothering Under Duress: Examining the Inclusiveness of Feminist Mothering Theory." Mothering and Feminism: Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. 8.1-2 (Winter/Summer 2006): 72-82.

Miles, Angela R. "Introduction." Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics. Eds. Angela R. Miles and Geraldine Finn. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982. 9-23.

Mill, John Stuart. The Subjection of Women. Ed. Susan Moller Okin. Indianapolis, IND: Hacket Publishing, 1988.

Miller, Nancy K. Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Millett, Kate. Sexual Politics. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse." Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. Ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 51-80.

Moi, Toril. "Introduction." The Kristeva Reader. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1-22.

Moravec, Michelle. "Mother Art: Feminism, Art and Activism." Troublesome Practices: Mothering, Literature, and Ethics." Mothering, Popular Culture and the Arts: Journal of the Association for Research into Mothering. 5.1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 69-77.

Morris, Pam. Literature and Feminism. Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1993.

Morley, Patricia. Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.

"Motherhood." The Canadian Oxford Dictionary. Ed. Katherine Barber. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998. 946.

Nash, Robert J. Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

New, W. H. "Introduction." Margaret Laurence. Ed. W. H. New. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1977. 1-11.

Nicholson, Colin. "Preface." Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence. Ed. Colin Nicholson. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. vii-xiv.

Niederhoff, Burkhard. "How to Do Things With History: Researching Lives in Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*." Journal of Commonwealth Literature. 35.2 (2000): 71-85.

Olsen, Tillie. Silences. New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978.

O'Reilly, Andrea. "Between the Baby and the Bathwater: Some Thoughts on a Mother-Centred Theory and Practice of Feminist Mothering." Mothering and Feminism: Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. 8.1-2 (Winter/Summer 2006). 323-30.

--- "Feminist Mothering." Maternal Theory: Essential Readings. Ed. Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007. 1-49.

--- From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004.

--- "Inaugurating the Association for Research On Mothering." Mothering and Motherhood: Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering. 1.1 (Spring/Summer 1999): 7-15.

--- "Introduction." Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering. ed. Andrea O'Reilly. Toronto: Women's Press, 2004. 1-28.

--- "Mothers, Daughters, and Feminism Today: Empowerment, Agency, Narrative, and Motherline." 1998. Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women's Studies Reader. Ed. Althea Prince et al. Toronto: Women's Press, 2004. 207-214.

--- Rocking the Cradle: Thoughts on Motherhood, Feminism and the Possibility of Empowered Mothering. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006.

Perkin. J. Russell. "Inhabiting *Wuthering Heights*: Jane Urquhart's Rewriting of Emily Bronte." Victorian Review. 21.2 (Winter 1995). 115-128.

Peskowitz, Miriam. The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother? Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005.

Peterson, Linda. "Introduction." Wuthering Heights: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives. 2nd Ed. Ed. Linda Peterson. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1-11.

Petrie, Anne. Gone to an Aunt's. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998.

Pett, Alexandra. "Writing a Woman's Life: Celebration, Pathos, and Sorrow in

Margaret Laurence's Memoir Dance on the Earth." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 1996. 203-215.

Plett, Heinrich F. "Intertextualities." Intertextuality. Ed. Heinrich F. Plett. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991. 3-29.

Powers, Lyall. Alien Heart: The Life and Work of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003.

Pykett, Lyn. "Changing the Names: The Two Catherines." Wuthering Heights: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives. Ed. Linda Peterson. 2nd Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 468-472.

Rak, Julie. "Introduction: Widening the Field: Auto/biography Theory and Criticism in Canada." Auto/biography in Canada: Critical Directions. Ed. Julie Rak. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2005. 1-29.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices. London: Sage Publications, 2002.

Rebick, Judy. Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution. Toronto: Penguin, 2005.

Reed-Danahay, Deborah E. "Introduction." Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social. New York: Oxford, 1997. 1-17.

Rehak, Melanie. Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and The Women Who Created Her. Orlando, FLA: Harcourt Inc., 2005.

Rich, Adrienne. Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. 1976. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Riegel, Christian. "Introduction: Recognizing the Multiplicity of the Oeuvre." Challenging Territory: The Writing of Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001. xi-xxiii.

Roberts, Gillian. "Sameness and Difference: Border Crossings in *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry's Party*." Canadian Literature. 191 (Winter 2006): 86-102.

Rowe-Finkbeiner, Kristin. The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004.

Roy, Wendy. "Autobiography as Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*." Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction. Eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 113-146.

Ruddick, Sara. Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

Saunders, Valerie. "First Wave Feminism." The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism. Ed. Sarah Gamble. New York: Routledge, 2000. 16-28.

Shields, Carol. The Box Garden. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1977.

--- Happenstance: two novels in one about a marriage in transition. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1997.

--- Larry's Party. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1997.

--- The Republic of Love. 1992. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1994.

--- The Stone Diaries. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993.

--- Small Ceremonies. 1976. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995.

--- Swann. 1987. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996.

--- Unless. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2002.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminism and Literature." Literary Theory Today. Eds. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan. Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1990. 179-202.

--- "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution." The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

--- "Twenty Years On: A Literature of Their Own Revisited." Novel: A Forum in Fiction. 31:3 (Summer 1998). 399-413.

Sibley, Robert. "Grist for Canadian Fem-Lit." Report. Alberta Ed. 28:18 (September 24, 2001). 58-59.

Slethaug, Gordon E. "'The Coded Dots of Life'" Carol Shields's Diaries and Stones. Canadian Literature. 156 (Spring 1998): 59-81.

Slopen, Beverley. "Jane Urquhart: Writing for Art's Sake." 11/24/97. Publishers Weekly.com. June 25, 2003. http://publishersweekly.reviewnews.com/index.asp?layout=articlePrint &articleID=CA1

Smith, Sidonie. "The Universal Subject, Female Embodiment, and The Consolidation of Autobiography." Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century. Bloomington, IND: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Smith, Valerie. "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other.'"

1989. Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Revised Ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 311-325.

Staines, David. "Introduction." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 1-5.

Stanley, Liz. "From 'self-made women' to 'women's made-selves'?: Audit selves, simulation and surveillance in the rise of public woman." Feminism and Autobiography. Ed. Tess Cosslett. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 2000. 40-60.

Steenman-Marcuse, Conny. "Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Feminism in Canada." Re-Writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001. 11-52.

Stoneman, Patsy. "Political Readings." Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte. Critical Ed. Ed. Patsy Stoneman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 135-186.

Stovel, Nora Foster. Rachel's Children: Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992.

--- Stacey's Choice: Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*. Toronto: ECS Press, 1993.

Swayze, Walter E. "Introduction: Knowing through Writing: The Pilgrimage of Margaret Laurence." Crossing the River: Essays In Honour of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. 3-24.

Taylor, Cynthia. "Coming to Terms with the Image of the Mother in *The Stone*

Angel." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. 161-171.

The 3rd WWWave: Feminism for the new Millenium. April 1, 2007. http://www.3rdwwwave.com/

Thomas, Clara. The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited, 1975.

--- Margaret Laurence. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited, 1969.

Thornham, Sue. "Second Wave Feminism." The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism. Ed. Sarah Gamble. New York: Routledge, 2000. 29-42.

Todd, Janet. Feminist Literary History. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Tompkins, Jane. "Me and My Shadow." The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism. Eds. D. P. Freedman et al. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. 23-40.

Turkle, Sherry. Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution. 2nd Ed. New York: The Guildford Press, 1992.

Turner, Margaret E. "The Woman in the Text: Autobiography, Intertextuality, and the Reading of Julia Cruikshank." Essays on Canadian Writing. 54 (Winter 1994). 101-123.

Umansky, Lauri. "Down With Motherhood? Ambivalence in the Emerging Feminist Movement." Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 16-51.

Urquhart, Jane. "Author's generosity of spirit enriched lives of her readers." Globe and Mail. 18 July 2003: A1+.

--- Away. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Incs., 1993.

--- Changing Heaven. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990.

--- "Losing Paul: A Memoir." Dropped Threads 2: More of what We Aren't Told. Eds. Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003. 7-17.

--- A Map of Glass. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005.

--- "Returning to the Village." 75 Readings Plus. 1st Canadian Edition. Eds. Santi V. Buscemi, Charlotte Smith, and Robert Wiznura. Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2002. 8-11.

--- The Stone Carvers. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001.

--- The Underpainter. 1993. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.

--- The Whirlpool. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986.

Valverde, Mariana. "Introduction." The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Inc., 1991. 15-33.

--- " 'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism." Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. 3-26.

van Herk, Aritha. "The Eulalias of Spinsters and Undertakers." Crossing the River: Essays In Honour of Margaret Laurence. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988. 133-146.

--- "Margaret Laurence: The Shape of the Writer's Shadow." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 135-44.

Wachtel, Eleanor. "Interview with Carol Shields." A Room of One's Own. 13.1/2 (July 1989): 5-45.

Walker, Alice. In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Walters, Margaret. Feminism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

Ward, Susan. "Morag Gunn in Fictional Context: The Career Woman Theme in *The Diviners*." New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. 179-85.

Ware, Tracy. "Race and Conflict in Garner's 'One-Two-three Little Indians' and Laurence's 'The Loons.'" Studies in Canadian Literature. 23.2 (1998): 71-84.

Warwick, Susan J. River of Now and Then: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1993.

Weese, Katherine. "The 'Invisible' Woman: Narrative Strategies in *The Stone Diaries*. Journal of Narrative Theory. 36.1 (Winter 2006): 90-120.

Werlock, Abby H. P. "Canadian Identity and Women's Voices: The Fiction of Sandra Birdsell and Carol Shields." Canadian Women Writing Fiction. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 126-41.

Wilkins, Charles. "The Deconstruction of Love." A Room of One's Own. 13.1/2 (July 1989): 91-98.

Willard-Traub, Margaret. "Scholarly Memoir: An Un-'Professional' Practice." Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing. Eds. Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2001. 27-50.

Williams, David. "Making Stories, Making Selves: 'Alternate Versions' in *The Stone Diaries*. Canadian Literature. 186 (Autumn 2005): 10-28.

Wilson, Lois. "Faith and the Vocation of the Author." Margaret Laurence: Critical Reflections. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001. 151-62.

Woodcock, George. "Preface." A Place to Stand On: Essays By and About Margaret Laurence. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983. 9-12.

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas. 1929/1938. ed. Michele Barrett. London: Penguin, 1993.

Wordsworth, William. "*From* Lyrical Ballads." 1802. Romanticism: An Anthology. Ed. Duncan Wu. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994. 253-69.

Wyile, Herb. "Jane Urquhart: Confessions of a Historical Geographer." Essays on Canadian Writing. 81 (Winter 2004): 58-83.

Xiques, Donez. Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005.